A Not Very Nice Novella

by

J. C. Clover-Cook

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Chapter One

I've been fantasizing about setting myself on fire.

For how long?

For as long as it takes for me to die, which I hope won't take more than a minute or two at the very most.

That's not what I meant. I mean, how long have you been having this fantasy?

Oh. For several months.

Why have you never mentioned it before now?

I almost did during our last session, but I was afraid you'd try to talk me out of doing it.

Well, Johnathan, I'm certainly going to try. I'd be a poor excuse for a doctor if I didn't.

There's nothing you can say that will change my mind.

Then why are you telling me now?

My mind is made up, so it's safe for me to confide in you. Also, the closer I come to doing it the more afraid I am.

I am forced to asked you why?

Why am I afraid? Obviously, I'm afraid that turning myself into a human torch is going to hurt, considerably.

I'm sure it will, but I was wondering why you want to set yourself on fire to begin with not why you're afraid?

Oh. Publicity.

For your novels?

Yes.

Setting yourself on fire is a high price to pay for publicity.

I have no choice.

Burning to death is not a pleasant way to die.

Probably not, but how does anyone know for sure unless they've actually burned to death? Maybe the pain becomes so intense the experience turns into something blissful and beautiful. Besides, I didn't know there was a pleasant way to die.

I've counselled people who have been burn victims. The words excruciating and agonizing come to mind.

Well, the words unpublished and unknown come to my mind. I'm sure there are better ways for you to receive recognition for your writing?

I've tried every way I know how. I've sent out synopses, scores of query letters, and numerous copies of the books themselves, but I've begun to believe that bad luck, or heavy karma is keeping me from getting published. As a matter of fact, I'm afraid that my luck is so bad it will begin to rain right after I ignite myself and I'll end up in a hospital burn unit undergoing painful skin grafts.

That's twice now that you've mentioned being afraid?

I don't have a phobia about fire, if that's what you mean? I admit, though, that I'm a little concerned about how much it will hurt and how long I'll remain conscious.

When are you planning to do it?

I've submitted copies of all my novels to three different publishers. I'll do it as soon as I receive my last rejection letter.

What if one of those three publishers wants to publish your books?

That is the one thing that would change my mind, but there's not much chance of that happening. I might as well light the match right now.

We've talked about your pessimism before. It's possible that all three publishers will show an interest in your work. Your negative attitude is probably what's been preventing you from finding a publisher for the past decade.

That's funny, I always thought it was bad writing, or my inability to afford postage, or the publishing industry's propensity to produce commercial tripe. At least that's what I've been telling myself, as you painfully pointed out, for the past decade.

Well, yes it's possible those things all play a part in your remaining unpublished, but...

Except for the bad writing. I was joking about that. I'm a great writer. I am the greatest writer living, but not for long.

How is your depression?

It's fine, thank you.

I'd like for you to get your Lithium level tested again.

I stopped taking it, and the tranquilizers.

Why?

They weren't working. The Lithium levelled my mood swings, but it did nothing for the depression and it certainly didn't relieve me of my intellectual desire for death. The tranquilizers worked in so far as they calmed me down, but I abused them by taking too many too often.

When did you go off the Lithium?

A couple of weeks ago.

You shouldn't have stopped taking it suddenly without telling me. Quitting it is likely the reason you've concocted this elaborate suicide.

I dreamt it up before quitting the Lithium. I can even remember the precise moment when I first got the idea. I was lying in bed late one night unable to sleep as usual, feeling frantic to find a publisher as always, and smoking as much as any hardcore nicotine addict. My room was dark and I deliberately let the match I used to light my cigarette burn down to my fingers. The heat I felt from the flame was what gave me the idea to set myself on fire. For the rest of the night I couldn't sleep. I was so excited I stayed awake until morning making plans and asking myself if I had enough courage or enough indifference to do it.

When exactly are you planning to do it?

On the six o'clock evening news if I have any say in the matter.

Can you be more specific?

I told you before, as soon as I receive my last rejection. If I give you more details you may try to stop me.

I am going to try to stop you by convincing you that you have many other options.

You can try from now until I'm covered in gasoline, but it won't get you anywhere.

Speaking of where, do you know yet where you are going to do it?

Not exactly. At some large literary gathering in front of a roomful of agents, editors, and the blessed book publisher that's going to launch the novels I leave behind. Or, outside of some huge New York based publishing company.

And you really believe that by setting yourself on fire your writing will receive recognition?

No, but I'm hoping that someone will take notice and will read my books. Then I believe that what I've written will garner it's own recognition.

That's a big risk you're taking. What if no one pays any attention to your having set yourself

on fire?

I've got nothing to lose.

Except your life.

To begin with I'm going to call several news stations beforehand and tell them that some famous writer is about to set fire to himself. After that I'll pour a gallon or two of gasoline all over myself and a copy of each of my manuscripts. Then I'll wait for the reporters to arrive with their news cameras. As soon as they do I'll light a match and with any luck enlighten the world with a whole lot of literature.

That's a very dramatic scenario.

Of course if I choose a literary gathering of some sort, like a festival of authors, there will probably be news cameras already there. If that's the case I'll douse myself with the gasoline before going into the building, or maybe it might be better to conceal the can and douse myself in the men's room? Then somehow I'll sneak up to the podium, or whatever place is the most appropriate so long as it's center stage, and after spouting off something poetic and profound and written in advance, I'll strike the fatal match.

Is success really that important to you?

Success? Success? Who said anything about success? I'm no longer concerned about becoming a world renowned novelist. I'm doing this because I'm afraid that my books are going to fall into oblivion or be lost forever. I used to have grandiose dreams about my books all becoming best-sellers, and about all the fame and money that that would bring, but not anymore.

Why, because you're HIV positive?

Yes, and if I don't do something dramatic before I die of AIDS the books may never be discovered. My greatest fear is that the few copies in existence will be lost, and all my creative giving, regardless of whether it was good or bad, will have been in vain. And it's ironic, for I have always wanted to set the world on fire with my writing. Now I am going to be the beacon that will guide readers to my books. In my fantasy I am a phoenix, and after I immolate myself I'll rise and be reborn for all of posterity in the shape of six best-selling novels.

That's all very good in theory, but there's no guarantee that setting yourself on fire, as abominable and unthinkable as it might be to many, will create any interest in your writing. You might make the evening news and nothing more. Your death, albeit dramatic, may only be a footnote for something the press and the public deems more newsworthy that day, like the stock market report or the weather.

You're forgetting that I've got nothing to lose. Except for a few moments of excruciating and agonizing pain, as you pointed out, I'm not making much of a sacrifice. Of course the world is not going to know, at least not right away, that I was HIV positive and destined to die sooner than later. They'll think that I'm a truly insane gifted artist sacrificing all for his life's work.

Well, even if setting fire to yourself precipitates the entire world into reading every one of your novels from beginning to end you won't know about it because you'll be dead.

Yes, but at least I'll have died with the knowledge that I did everything I could to ensure that the books are published. And you keep forgetting that I'm going to be dead soon anyway, so it's not as though I'm sacrificing a potential fifty years of living.

You could live for a very long time. You're HIV positive. You don't have full blown AIDS.

No, but I have a negative attitude, and I lead an unhealthy lifestyle, which I have not enough will to change. I also have a T-cell count of zero.

Since when?

Since I don't know when? Since my immune system was destroyed.

I thought that you decided not to have your count done again? I decided finding out if I was close to getting full blown AIDS would inspire me to go ahead with my plan. I got the results back last week. So you see it's very likely that I don't have long to live anyway.

But why not use whatever time you have left to find a publisher in a normal manner instead of trying to make some type of symbolic statement?

Because I could get sick tomorrow and then where would my books be? I can't afford to wait for some publisher to make up their mind after finally picking my books up out of their "slush pile." I can't afford to wait until I'm an invalid too incapacitated to market the books or too weak to even light a match. And I can't afford to market them anyway. I never have been able to. I've made up my mind, so there's really nothing more to say on the subject except that I won't be coming back to see you again.

Why is that?

I'm ok with taking any neuroses I have left with me to my grave.

Are you sure you're not just afraid that through more therapy you might find another solution to your problem?

Setting myself on fire is not a solution. It's the last desperate attempt of a man who is running out of time. I'm not a fool. I'm not deluding myself. I know that as we speak there are innocent children suffering and dying all over this apathetic world, so I know that the public is not going to mourn the death of some desperate writer. I'm just praying that it will be a boring day in America and the media will make mention of my having set myself on fire just long enough to spark the interest of some publisher. And for the record, since you write done nearly everything I say as soon as I'm gone, I am not afraid of anything, or at the very least I have always made it a point to challenge and confront my fears.

You're afraid that your novels are not going to be discovered. That's not a fear. It's a strong possibility. I am afraid, though, that I should have put more time and energy and money into promoting the books, but for some reason it always seemed more important that I put the book I had just completed away to begin another and another. I suppose that was because I always believed I had the future ahead of me. Now, I realize that was an illusion, because the future is an intangible thing for us all. In that respect I'm grateful for having contracted the AIDS virus. It's made me realize how vulnerable the books are and have always been. There has always been the possibility that they would become orphans that might never be adopted. Whatever the reason, whether it was lack of finances, lack of faith, or lack of foresight, I lied when I said before that I sent out scores of query letters and synopses, for I never have. I never submitted the manuscripts as often as I should have or as often as they deserved. If I were to call myself a parent and my novels my children it could be said that I abused them by keeping them locked up, by not allowing them to go out into the world. At one point I had written three novels in a row without ever submitting any of them until over a year later. Even then I sent them out only once.

How many books have you written?

Six.

Why do you think you never sent them out?

I told you. I always figured it could wait. Ok, maybe I was afraid that if I was rejected too many times I would have to face some horrible truth, like the fact that I had no talent, but that

can't be true. What reason could there be for my having been as inspired as I was to write the novels if I were without talent? But, no matter what the world decides in judgement of my books I will die believing that despite all the foibles of my writing I was a gifted storyteller. To be honest, though, I guess I am sometimes afraid that I'm not as great a writer as I would like to have been, or perhaps could have been. I suppose I'm afraid of a lot of things, but I am not afraid of setting myself on fire.

Maybe you should be?

Why? So what if it hurts? The word life should be a synonym for the word pain, and striving for something is synonymous with having to make sacrifices. I've had to make sacrifices with each book I wrote so what I'm about to do is not an unusual burden for me to bear. The only difference is that instead of just sacrificing love, financial stability, my sanity, or worst of all the endless hours spent alone, I am going to sacrifice myself entirely for the whole corpus of my work. It's time for me to become a good parent and the best way for me to do that is to make certain that my children are given an opportunity to go on living. And like I said since I'm terminally ill it's really not much of a sacrifice.

Your greatest illness is and probably always has been your unrelenting negativeness.

So says the doctor. But, you know, doc, I've been a pessimist for as long as I can remember, so how can I be expected to change my outlook on life when now I have even more cause to be negative? I don't know how. All I know for certain is that I am going to breathe eternal life into my books by setting myself on fire.

So says the novelist.

Chapter Two

In the United States of America, the country where I have been residing for the past year, a gallon of gasoline costs only a few dollars, and a book of matches no more than a penny or two. The minuscule amount it is going to cost me to market my books makes me overjoyed. It would seem that committing suicide, in such a manner, is going to cost far less than the price of return postage for any one of my manuscripts. Unfortunately, there are several other expenses that must be met if I am to follow through with my plan accordingly. Presently, though, I can not afford to fulfil them, for as I mentally calculate all the requirements of what I have come to call "my marketing campaign", not a suicide, it occurs to me quite suddenly that I overlooked my need to have bus fare to New York City, the most likely and suitable location for my self-induced incineration. I also need a photocopy of each novel soaked in gasoline so that all my books might burn alongside me. As well, I will need a roll of quarters to call as many news stations as possible just prior to the burning. And, while walking home from my psychiatrist's office, I give way to a vision of my books going up in flames of unmitigated glory by my blazing feet. I am consumed as much by this vision as I will undoubtedly be by the actual fire. In fact I can almost smell, at this precognitive moment, the sickening odour of my flesh as it melts off my bones, and then gathers, as I'm sure it will, in liquefied pools upon the pavement. It can be said as well that in my vision I see my bones remain standing long after my flesh and innards have been consumed. Subsequently, I see my skeleton standing upright, erect in the heart of New York City. More often than not, because of the empty creature that I have recently become, I find myself walking about this earth as though I were already some sort of skeletal remains. Of course in reality and in all likelihood, I will roll around on the pavement in agony, screaming for the immediate mercy of some nonexistent God, trying, while in pain more horrific than I ever imagined, to put out the fire that I was foolish enough to start. I do not allow myself now, or at any time previous, to dwell on the reality of the event, for if I did I would surely have second thoughts about striking that fatal match. Once this premonition has passed my mind turns to more pragmatic aspects of my plan and it dawns on me that I will have to send the original copies of each manuscript to my mother in Canada for safekeeping. I am less than a block away from my home when I remember my intent to send her some posthumously appropriate synopses as well. As soon as I am inside the room that I am renting by the week I search in my desk for the synopses. I want to put them in plain view so as not to forget to send them. I wrote them right after finishing my last novel nearly six months ago now. I have not written since. In the likely event that I did not secure a publisher prior to my death I wrote the synopses in such a way as to make them suitable to be sent out posthumously. I can not help wondering, as I read the opening paragraph how my mother is going to react when she sees her eldest son go up in flames on the evening news, if indeed I am fortunate enough to do so?

I stop reading, for I am uncertain about that last line: "you will be the one who guides them to their resting place." I don't give a damn who guides them so long as someone does. Nor do I envision them resting anywhere. I imagine my books being circulated around the globe, read and revered by generation after generation.

The rest of the pages I am holding contain a detailed description of each of the novels. Only briefly do I glance at it before putting it back down on my desk. I can not bare to look back at my writing unless I am prepared to see a myriad of mistakes, both real and imaginary, and do a rewrite, which I am presently not prepared to do. Yet, there is no such thing as perfection, I tell myself, as I turn away from my desk to look around my room, which certainly confirms the

notion of there being no such thing as perfection. My room is the smallest in the run down rooming house, but for financial reasons I am forced to call this hovel my home. Only twice in my lifetime have I ever had an apartment and more than a decade of time divided the two. As a result of my transient lifestyle I have always been obliged to reside in rooming houses of one sort or another. Looking disdainfully at my present accommodations, that I have most assuredly come to despise, I see it clearly as being an eight by ten foot prison cell in the heart of this place called Provincetown. Albeit, my walls are not as confining as those of an actual prison cell, and the door of my room is locked only from the inside allowing me to escape at will. It is my lack of will, and what I encounter so often on the other side of that door that often traps me in my room, as much as heavily armed guards might. It is mid summer and hordes of tourists have congregated from across the country to this island resort. It is mostly gay men and women, very much like myself, who have come to vacation on the island, unlike myself, who has been here for a year to write. I arrived the previous summer and stayed through the winter past. To confirm this I check the date on a calendar positioned beside a poster of Desiderius Erasmus, the Dutch humanist, scholar, and theologian, whom I admittedly know little of, but the picture of him at an old age with pen in hand writing at a desk was not only inspirational when I saw it displayed in the book store, it was how I had always pictured myself fifty years from then. Pen in hand sitting at a desk in a dimly lit study working feverishly on my greatest masterpiece yet. Of course when I purchased the poster I had no idea at the time that I was HIV positive and would presumably not live for another fifty years, or in my particular case another five. Now, however, as I gaze dreamily at the poster with it's orange colored background I find myself fantasizing some more about setting myself ablaze. I wonder how long I should hold the match after lighting it? If perhaps I should pause for effect by allowing the match to burn down to my gasoline drenched fingers? In time, just prior to reaching the point where I become a pool of liquid flesh on the pavement of my yet to be decided place of death, I turn my attention back to the calendar, which tells me that today is Tuesday, and almost immediately my fear of becoming a homeless person tells me that my rent is due on Friday. If I am fortunate enough to receive my rejections in time I will no longer require the room and can use my rent money for my marketing campaign. I am hoping that that is the case, for then I can use the money to photocopy all the novels, pay for the postage to various publishers, send a letter to each stating that "I am the one you heard about on the news who set himself on fire," buy a book of matches, a roll of quarters, and a gallon of gasoline. After adding up the proposed costs of all of the above I realize it is possible that I'll have enough to purchase two gallons of nonleaded gasoline.

Only a few moments later I find myself compelled to return to my desk, and to look once again at the synopses that I previously set meticulously down along the back of my writing desk in a confessedly compulsive manner. Behind these properly positioned, and perfectly aligned, pages are the books themselves, each in a box of their own. Staring fixedly at the manuscripts, I am suddenly overwhelmed by a warmhearted feeling, for whenever I think of all the characters I've created I am inclined to become sentimental. I find it strange, or maybe not so strange, that the many people I have met over the course of my life, or even those whom I have known intimately, no one remains as close to me now, or as dear to my heart, as the fictitious characters living amongst my work. For reasons which I admit are entirely sentimental I begin to casually read the synopses. The one that I read first belongs to the book that I first wrote over a period of five years, not including the fact that I have made revisions right up until a year ago. In many ways, perhaps because it is my longest novel, over seven hundred manuscript pages, it

remains to be my favourite of the six. After changing the title several times throughout the years I finally came to call it, in homage to it's main character, Kyle Reeves.

Chapter Three

KYLE REEVES

by
J. C. Clover-Cook

As an aspiring singer, songwriter, actor, comedian, gay activist, and one of New York City's most flamboyant nightclub performers, Kylie Reeves has just finished working his way to the top of the New York City gay nightclub circuit when he meets...

Brenden Michaels, the movie star, is in New York looking for somebody to co-star in the biggest feature film Hollywood has ever made about...

A love affair between two men blossoms when Kyle and Brenden fall in love with each other off screen. But, can Brenden cope with the fact that his star is falling? Can Kyle continue to cling to his rapidly rising star? Can either of them manage to maintain their love for each other amidst the mayhem that is Kyle Reeves? Will "Hurricane Kyle's" number one fan finally be forced to face his own sexuality, or will he succumb to his desire to shoot the super star? Will Brenden succumb to their chauffeur? Will the porno movie that Kylie made in New York City be released to the general public? Will Brenden find out that Kylie had sex with a seventy five year old man for money before becoming the revered Kyle Reeves? Will the Reverend Caldwell ever be convinced to stop writing anti-gay hate literature? Will the small-minded members of the Moral Majority ever change their miserable minds? Will the world ever forget the incredible Kyle Reeves?

When I finish reading I find myself in an even more sentimental state of mind, for I fondly remember the innocence that I possessed at the time I wrote the novel compared to my presently corrupt existence. I for one, however, will never forget Kyle. Whether he and the other characters within the book will be lost and forgotten in the throng of world literature, or whether they will ever be discovered in what publishers commonly call "the slush pile" I do not know. I do know that like all the characters I've created Kyle will accompany me to my resting place.

My second novel took only two years to write, and it was written in anger that stemmed from the disappointment a young writer feels from being rejected for the first time. I was told that Kyle Reeves, which I laboured assiduously on for a solid five years, was too long and therefore too expensive to print for a first time author who was entirely unknown. I was also advised by one publisher in particular to write short stories. In retrospect, after years of resentment, I now realize that quite probably the publisher meant as a way to break into the business, but at the time I took the casual remark to mean that I was unable or inadequately equipped to write a novel. Needless to say the hurt I felt inspired me to write another novel and then another and another and another and yet another. Allow me now, however, to digress back to my second novel, which was also inspired by my concern then and now for the environment and for the rights of animals. On the sole occasion when I submitted the manuscript it too was rejected. The main reason given to me was there had been a deluge of environmental books on the market so publishers were not considering any more. "The problems with the environment have not gone away just because every book publisher on the planet jumped on the environmental bandwagon

to make a buck," I complained to myself. "And besides," I said to still no one but myself, "the book is fiction, so fuck you all."

"A RAVEN IN NEW YORK CITY"

by

J. C. Clover-Cook

Raven is a voracious reader, who dreams of becoming a famous writer, and by working hard, his friends say, "He has transformed himself into a Faulkner with feathers." Raven, his wife Rebecca, Rabbit, and his wife Ruth, Bachelor Buck, and his best friend Mr. Bear, Sea Gull, and his girl friend Sally, are just some of the anthropomorphic animal characters who's endangered lives inspire Raven to write The Woman From Raven Rock. The beautiful Mona Babcock, the woman in question, is a vegan environmentalist and misanthropist, who prides herself on having become the nations most prolific mass murderess. Mona, who claims she can communicate with both plants and animals, tries to take on the world single-handedly with the hope of changing humankind for the better, but what she does is more disastrous to the earth than even Raven, her creator, imagined possible. Yet, no one is more outraged by Raven's writing than Mother Nature herself, and none are more surprised than the urban dwellers that have never before had the pleasure of seeing "A Raven in New York City."

After reading the synopsis of my second novel I know that Raven, like many of my main characters, is an extension of myself. The frustrated writer eager to change the world with his words, or set it on fire if you will.

Finding myself fatigued from my habit of being unable to sleep I am forced to consume a cup of instant coffee, for an electric kettle, a cup, and some water from the community bathroom is all that my income can afford. While sipping the flavourless brew I begin reading the synopsis of what became my next novel. I remember my third book as being an experimental journey into the unknown, for it's center is written in play form. And although I had not written it to appear on stage, I can recall reading numerous plays at the time to research the art of writing for the theater.

A DRAMATIST AND HIS DIALOGUE WITH THE DEVIL

by

J. C. Clover-Cook

John, the prostitute turned novelist, turns playwright when he is struck by a bolt of lightening in Central Park, and thereafter inspired to write a play about the Second Coming of Christ he finds himself at the mercy of critics from all across the country. "The play is sacrilegious," they complain after witnessing the horrendous events that took place during the opening night performance. But, is the play as sacrilegious as everyone says? Was the baby that Ovary, the understudy, gave birth to on stage really the Baby Jesus? What iniquitous person put the newborn Baby Jesus back into it's crib in place of the lifelike doll that was supposed to be used for the slaying scene? Was Ovary actually a virgin miraculously inseminated by the Holy Spirit, or is she herself behind the cold-blooded murder of her own infant? Is Esther, the wardrobe lady, really psychic, or is she another of Embryo's evil accomplices? What happened to the mysterious stagehand? Why was Semen shot and then left to slowly die on a darkened stage? Who put bullets instead of blank cartridges into the gun? Who burned down the Broadway Avenue theater? Was it the same person that switched the phony water filled syringe with a real hypodermic needle full of pure heroin? Was the bloody massacre that took place on opening night premeditated, or was Embryo's diabolical rampage executed solely on the spur of

the moment? Whose charred corpses did the police discover in the basement of the burned down theater? What super natural force was behind a huge black cloud's ability to follow the play uptown? Only after a showdown with the Devil in Central Park will John and the rest of the world discover the identity of the mastermind behind all of the above, whose demonic deeds spawned the soon to be true story that revolved around A Dramatist and His Dialogue with the Devil.

As with the two previous novels that I had written when I finished my third I thought that it was the one that was going to take me to the very top of the literary world. I was sure that I was on my way to becoming a world renowned novelist sought after by some of the most important people on the planet, but of course I was wrong once again. After submitting the manuscript to two different publisher and one agent I was informed that the style of my writing was pompous, stilted, and bombastic. Too many cliches, I was told as well, and to be truthful I no longer expected anything but negative responses, so it can be said that without too much heartache I put the book away knowing that it had been my intent to be pompous and bombastic. I went to work on my next novel, which I had already begun long before finishing my third. I had planned on writing something more "commercial," and my desire to do so resulted in my writing about a writer trying to write something more "commercial." My fourth novel, much like my third, is partially autobiographical, for it is based on a disastrous affair I had with an extremely violent alcoholic. Mostly, though, like all my books it too is entirely fictional, since I have never had the pleasure of meeting at ghost.

MY GOTHIC ROMANCE
by
J. C. Clover-Cook

A novelist staying at the Waldorf=Astoria in New York City is asked to write something more commercial, such as a romance novel. Abhorred by the idea, but determined to become successful, the novelist agrees, and is aided by the ghosts of nearly a hundred dead writers whose visits are always an inspiration. Jane Austen, the most frequent visitor, becomes a close confidant to the novelist and often lends her literary skills. Barbra Lovenstein, a prostitute, who works the Lower East Side, and Michael Burrows, the son of a wealthy banker, are the two protagonists picked by the novelist to be the hero and heroine. But when the two characters begin to "take on a life of their own," what was meant to be a romance novel turns into a harrowing expose about wife abuse. It is during a clandestine party on the rooftop of the Waldorf=Astoria when the reason for the aforementioned nightmare is discovered. And then while celebrating the completion of The Battered Bride, the novelist, surrounded by hordes of famous ghostwriters, is asked by the legendary Homer about the seeming authenticity of Michael Burrows' barbarous behaviour. All the ghostwriters are horrified to hear the novelist admit that The Battered Bride was inspired in part upon "My Gothic Romance."

At this point in time I had completed four novels, and nearly a year went by before I began another. A year of drug abuse, and debauchery, prostitution, and travel, and the very worst of all, for which I would soon pay the price, unsafe sex. My Gothic Romance was rejected twice, but both times no reason was given for their lack of interest. I received form letters with a great

deal of resign. Then came the diagnoses I had been both dreading and expecting. I was informed by a free clinic that I was HIV positive. With this news came an urgent need to write another novel. My fifth book was called The AIDS Carrier up until it's final revision at which time I decided it would be better to change it's title to something more uplifting.

THE CURE OF THE CRIMSON COLORED CLOVER

by

J. C. Clover-Cook

In a small rowboat off the coast of Grand Cayman Island, novelist, Johnathan Crimson Clover-Cook, and his best friend, screenwriter, Joseph Burning, are suffering the symptoms of full blown AIDS. Planning to commit a simultaneous suicide at sea, John reads aloud what destiny has decided will be his last novel. The story that he recites to his friend takes place sometime in the twenty first century, just prior to the cure that is discovered for AIDS. Centered around two of Hollywood's biggest stars, the openly gay and world renowned, Kyle Reeves, and his lover and recent co-star, Clover O'Gotten, John's novel is a painful reminder to the young Joseph Burning that his dreams of becoming a Hollywood film-maker have been destroyed by "a devastating disease." Joseph's artistic suffering is parallel only to John's desire to have seen his books in print. They are both doomed to die undiscovered, since it is still the twentieth century, and Joseph and John, adrift in a rowboat on the Caribbean sea, have no hope of their ever receiving The Cure of the Crimson Colored Clover.

Once again, like so much of my work, my fifth novel is semi- autobiographical, at least in so far as the fact that my best friend at the time, whose pen name is Joseph Burning, and myself, were both HIV positive. Of course unlike the plot of the book neither one of us had full blown AIDS, nor did we kill ourselves in the Caribbean, although the idea of doing so certainly did cross our minds on more than one occasion. As you know I am presently living in Provincetown, while the last I heard Joseph is still alive and living somewhere in Toronto, Canada, our mutual homeland and the city where we were both born. While making another cup of coffee I ponder the synopsis I just finished reading and how I had brought Kyle Reeves back to make an appearance in my fifth novel. I had planned upon it being a cameo, but Kyle, being what he is, his character soon developed into a more memorable one with a very large part to play. Returning right away to my desk with my coffee I now come to the last synopsis of the book that I wrote most recently. Of the six novels I have written it is my shortest, and deliberately so, for since writing Kyle Reeves I have been conscious of trying to keep my books at a more marketable length. Now, as I begin reading the final synopsis, I can't help recalling the unrequited love of my life, and about my own terminal illness, for they were both the inspiration that inspired me to write my sixth novel. I clearly remember as well the research I did into reincarnation, how it had calmed me while facing my own mortality to think that I might be reborn, and how I had been obliged and then enthraled to read Shakespeare for the very first time.

THE SEARCH FOR THE REINCARNATED ROMEO AND JULIET

by

J. C. Clover-Cook

Alpha, who is terminally ill, wants to see Omega one last time before dying. Upon arranging a rendezvous with Omega, Alpha returns to the small town of Loveville, the place where our two protagonists met in an ill-fated manner fifteen years ago. Waiting impatiently at the Heart-to-Heart motel in the aftermath of a tornado, Alpha can only lie in bed and wonder why Omega does not come? Even amidst an enormous amount of physical pain, Alpha believes there is nothing on this earth more painful than being joined and then separated from one's soul-mate, and frankly Omega feels the same, for there is no denying the fact that fifteen years ago they fell tragically in love with each other. Some facts, however, are far less obvious. Are Alpha and Omega a man and a woman? Are they two men? Are they both women? Are they the reincarnations of Antony and Cleopatra? Did they once live as the two world famous writer's Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas? Will Alpha and Omega be reunited in this life to consummate their eternal love? Are they fated to fall in love with each other again in their next life? John, a reporter for The Loveville Chronicle, will uncover the answers to these questions and more during the investigation that is The Search for the Reincarnated Romeo and Juliet.

I am finished. I am fatigued. I am frustrated. I am furious. I am fucked. And setting the synopses aside in a careless manner that is uncustomary for my compulsive nature, but which is brought about by feelings of utter despair, I realize that I am also suffering from a bout of extreme loneliness. How could I not be? I ask myself. I have isolated myself for the past decade from any kind of intimacy telling myself that it was necessary to do so in order to write, so that now not only am I incapable of reaching out for human companionship I am unable to respond when someone reaches out to me, except in a manner that more often than not is savage. Perhaps my present state of mind is due more to the fact that I have just read what are meant to be the book jackets for all of my novels. I am reminded, therefore, of the many characters that have sprung forth from my imagination, most of whom I might add were not mentioned in the synopses, but all of whom are an important part of my life. It is this devastating realization, this pitiful truth, that makes my squalid room all the more miserable and far more lonely than it ought to be. Had I spent some time cultivating real life companions instead of spending all my time creating companions that exist only inside myself and on page after page of prose I might not be so miserable. I am not surprised, though, that they have come as they presently have to rescue me from my loneliness, for they have done so many times before during moments much more woeful than one I am experiencing now. Oh yes, my characters can always be counted on. They are faithful, and are always there whenever I beckon them to be. They can not beat me mercilessly like the man I based Michael Burrows upon. They can not break my young heart like the real life Omega so carelessly did. And it is my characters that have kept me company all through this past winter when the cold wind blew as it so often did outside my tiny window, and several feet of snow was piled atop of Provincetown. And for many winters past in places I no longer care to recall my characters have kept me company. Except for the weather, for it is summer and the sun is shining, today is no different. My loneliness is equivalent to what it has been for as long as I can remember. Granted, I could go out this evening to mingle merry heartedly amongst the many tourists this island resort town has to offer, but my fear of the unknown forces me to stay indoors. Besides, I decide as I gaze at the manuscripts piled up on my

desk, I have enough bittersweet memories to take with me to my grave. So it is decided, I shall remain inside my self-imposed prison with the door locked from within, safe and fully resigned from the human race. I know it is fear that has forced me to be content with such a reclusive existence, for I can not go out even on those rare occasions when I desire to do so. I am like a large open wound living on this earth upon which anyone can cause immense pain simply by touching and the more compassionate the person's touch the more pain I must endure. Still, like everyone I long to be touched, until those times when I am, and then I wish that I had never been. There is a mirror on the wall not far from where I am sitting and in my reflection I can see my weight loss, and the swollen glands in my throat. I laugh derisively, for I am not afraid to die. I am afraid to live, but more than anything I am afraid to love. I want nothing but to never look again into the eyes of my true love, whomever he might be? I want to go blind so that I can no longer see the potential for beauty in the world around me. I want to become deaf so that I will never again have to listen to the imagined sound of my true love's softly spoken words of avowal. For now, however, I am not driven to pour acid into my eyes, or to stick needles into my ears. I find myself feeling content and safe, for in my room all the characters that I have created have come together. Kyle, and Brenden, and Raven, and Rebecca, and Rabbit, and Ruth, and Mona, and Lascivious, and Ovary, and Semen, and Barbra, and Michael, and Clover, and Alpha, and Omega, and... I am not alone.

Chapter Four

When I awoke the following morning I was entirely alone, and as always a cup of coffee and several cigarettes were the first things that I consumed. I knew it was not a healthy way to begin the day for any person least of all a person who is HIV positive, but, as my psychiatrist had pointed out, other than the virus living inside of me there was nothing positive about myself. Proudly put I am the epitome of negativity. Waiting impatiently each morning for the mail to come was another thing that I did every day and that day was no different. I had grown accustomed to waiting anxiously for the mail since the first time I submitted a manuscript out into the world. I accepted this necessity and the sometimes slow delivery service as much as I did the rejection slips that I have always received. Some days I am desperate enough to delude myself into waiting for the mail with the hopes of receiving a positive reply from a publisher even when I know I have submitted nothing in the recent months. Miracles do happen, or so I have heard. On that particular day, however, I was not deluding myself as I waited for the mail. As I had told my psychiatrist I did have three submissions that I was waiting upon for either a positive or a negative reply. One might assume that after being rejected for over a decade I would begin to lose hope altogether, and for the most part I had, but still something about the resilience of the human spirit prevailed even in a pessimist like myself. There remained in me a small amount of conviction that one agent, editor, or publisher, would eventually see my genius. Yet, how many times had I also decided that I was deceiving myself and should have given up all hope and writing years ago. Now, it was too late. I was a writer through and through, good or bad, destined to fail or succeed, my fate, as they say, was sealed. I can remember leaving my room on the second floor that day and I was on my way down the stairs when I met the landlady. "Is the mail in yet?" I asked her as we proceeded to pass each other in the hallway.

She shrugged her shoulders as a way of saying she wasn't sure, and then she went into her room, which was the largest of the eight rented rooms in the house. Her name was Mrs. Poulopoulos. She was a silent sort of woman with a solemn yet otherwise expressionless face, who spoke Greek far better than English. At least that's what she led her tenants to believe, but on two occasions I caught her speaking to a delivery person in perfect unbroken English, barely showing any signs of an accent or even her ancestry. She was widowed and wore only black clothing as is the custom of the Greek culture. Her husband had died a year before I arrived on the island, but from all I had heard they had fought bitterly on a daily basis, so I often had to ask myself why Mrs. Poulopoulos remained in mourning. I mean it was a hip town in America we were all living in and not some conventional Greek village, and furthermore she was an extremely attractive woman in her mid forties who had many men vying for her attention. She devoted herself, however, to her children, of which she had two who lived in Boston and came to visit every other weekend throughout the year. Her daughter was some sort of a designer, and her son worked in construction. During the summer months Mrs. Poulopoulos's son would often stay for several weeks at a time. I looked forward to his extended visits and quite often found myself despondent to see him go back to Boston. I was deeply infatuated with the muscular young man ever since he came up to my room to pry open the window that had become stuck from several layers of paint applied over the past few years. "I have to have the window opened. How else can I get fresh air in my room," I had complained to Mrs. Poulopoulos shortly after moving into the house.

"Fine. Fine. I'll send my son up on the weekend when he comes."

His name was Greco. Greco Poulopoulos. I loved his name, and like his name might suggest

he was a Greek God that I could not take my eyes off whenever I was fortunate enough to lay them upon his nearly perfect face and physique. Of course it never occurred to me seriously that he could possibly have any interest in me, a poverty stricken would be writer with AIDS who was ten years his senior. "You're being negative again," I could hear my psychiatrist saying. "Alright, I'm positive he's not interested in me. Is that better?" would undoubtedly be my comeback had the topic ever been discussed between us, which it was not. I never mentioned my infatuation for Greco to anyone including the person I should have, Greco Poulopoulos himself.

I stepped outside that morning onto the front porch and into the hot summer sun to check the mail box that was shared with the entire household. After sorting through several envelopes addressed to various other tenants I found two letters for J. C. Clover-Cook. Without looking at the return addresses I knew them both to be from publishers, for Clover-Cook is certainly not my legal name. It is a decidedly stupid name that I use as a pseudonym for my writing. I raced back upstairs and once the door to my room was closed behind me feelings of apprehensiveness forced me to light a cigarette before I tore open one of the letters. As I recall, I did not blink, nor did my heart miss a beat, as I blankly stared at yet another rejection from the New York City publisher.

Dear Author, Unfortunately the material you sent us is not suitable for our literary needs at this time.

Best of luck.

You're the one in need of luck. It will be lucky for you if I don't go to New York and blow my brains out all over your desk. A form letter. A fucking form letter. I sent you six novels and you send me a form letter? I finished my cigarette while briefly fantasizing about shooting myself in front of this particular publisher. And then any publisher. I had, in fact, often fantasized about ending my life this way, until I was blessed with the idea of setting myself on fire. I had a more constructive fantasy at the time as well, which was to form my own publishing company that would take pride in publishing unknown writers, and would answer all unsolicited manuscripts and query letters with a personal and hopefully helpful encouraging reply. The fact that publishing houses receive thousands and thousands of submissions annually did not seem to ease my mind or make the hurt any less painful. I was a desperate man, who had to sit down and light another cigarette before opening the other letter, which I did with less enthusiasm that I had the last. It was another rejection, but at least it was not a form letter. After reading it, though, I almost wished it were. I don't know which of the two upset me more, form letters, or the opinions of people who glance briefly at a manuscript, list their dislikes, and then don't offer any sort of constructive criticism. But, book publishing is a big business, and I knew it better than anyone. I braced myself expertly from years of experience as I read the scathing remarks about my life's work.

Dear Mr. Clover-Cook, After reading a portion of the prologue and part of the first chapter of your novel Kyle Reeves, I decided my interest was not piqued enough to read the remaining seven hundred pages. Although your character, Kyle, is somewhat interesting I found Bobby Baynes to be boring. Furthermore, the novel is simply too long and thereby making it too costly for us to publish because of your being entirely unknown. Your second novel A Raven in New York City is too unbelievable and anthropomorphic animal characters are always a risk. In A

Dramatist and His Dialogue with the Devil I found your style to be pompous and again the premise is too far fetched for this particular publisher. Your fourth novel, My Gothic Romance, is too off the wall and entirely unsuitable for our needs. The Cure of the Crimson Colored Clover although timely because of the ongoing AIDS epidemic is depressing, morbid, and surely would not sell. I was somewhat encouraged while reading the first chapter of your sixth novel, The Search for the Reincarnated Romeo and Juliet, because it is an unusual story with a rather universal theme, but again your propensity to write in an off the wall manner is far too apparent, and furthermore the book is too short...

Too short? Too long? Too boring? Too off the wall? What do they want? I asked myself that day as I had done many times before since the first day I put words on paper. I also questioned once more my ability or my lack of. Maybe I could not write at all? Maybe my grammar was atrocious? My syntax poor? My plots too complicated, or perhaps too simple? My characters too flat. Finally, with an abundance of self-loathing I leered across the room at my manuscripts that totalled well over two thousand pages of prose. Not long after my will to become a good parent to my children no matter what the cost took hold. I asked myself several more familiar questions: Should I resubmit right away? Should I do yet another rewrite on the entire body of work from beginning to end? Should I pick a book that I believe to be the most marketable and revise only it? Should I sit back and wait for what I know will be my third and final rejection from the remaining publisher and then do what I have already decided upon? Should I take a bus to New York City, say fuck it all, and set myself on fire?

Chapter Five

The mail was late the following day, so by the time it finally arrived my anxiety was greater than usual. Our regular mailman was sick with the flu, and as so often is the case the replacement mail person took an alternate route. I was not expecting anything other than my last rejection and a phone bill that I could not afford to pay. I had made several lengthy long distance phone calls to Canada the month before knowing then that I would not care if they disconnected the phone in the near future for nonpayment. Per my decision to set myself on fire I would be dead soon, and since I would undoubtedly not be able to use AT&T in the hereafter the phone company could go fuck themselves.

Nothing came that day, and nearly a week went by before I heard from the publisher in New York, whom I deemed to be my last hope for a resurrection. It was only a few days after the July 4th weekend when the letter came. I had stayed in my room for the entire weekend watching from my window what I could of the constant party that took place at precisely the same time each year in Provincetown. As I have always had an aversion to formal celebrations I made sure that I had enough cigarettes and coffee to last me through the festivities. Being that I have never ventured out on New Years Eve, have never celebrated Christmas since I was a child, and have not gone out on Halloween night since I was a twelve year old who decided to perform drag in public wearing one of his mother's dresses, I did not feel at all alienated by spending the weekend alone in my room. And since I am not an American citizen celebrating the birth of their nation has little meaning for me. Nor for that matter does Canada Day put me in a festive mood anymore than that thing called Thanksgiving. What am I supposed to be thankful for? The fact

that there is a dead bird on the table? I am a vegetarian. The fact that millions of Native Americans were slaughtered and had their land stolen? I am not so much a thief as I am a pacifist. The more I thought about my life as a whole during that July 4th weekend the more akin I felt to the now famous Vincent Van Gogh. The loneliness he had to endure. The insanity he had to suffer. The fact that his work was not recognized during his lifetime. Ten years ago I was resigned to these truisms thanks in part to my highly tuned intuition. I knew long ago what lay ahead, so I stayed in my room staring complacently out my little window as the town continued to celebrate. I do admit that the fireworks being displayed depressed me. And the revelling that could be heard even from afar oftentimes enraged me. The togetherness that could be felt in the air from the entire town left me feeling forsaken. Subsequently, I can remember asking myself while absorbed in self-pity why my life could not have been different? What was it that had removed me so long ago from the rest of the world? Why did I choose this path of creation accompanied with a will to self-destruct? Without a doubt I had contracted the virus that causes AIDS as deliberately as if I had put a loaded gun to my head and had pulled the trigger. I was a fool. I knew better than most not to have unsafe sex, but for reasons beyond my comprehension I chose not to care. Now, and only now, do I regret not having had the courage to put a gun to my head instead. If I had I would not be alive today to feel such endless regret for having committed suicide in such a slow and stupid manner. Still, I am not dead yet. No, I remain living in hellish limbo, suffering the consequences, the worst of which, with death so near I now want to live. Yes, life is full of contradictions, and this is the largest that I must live with. Why, oh why, was I so convinced that I wanted to die? Did my emotions have so much power over me at the time so as to make me irrational enough not to see how precious all life is, mine included? Maybe, but whatever my reasoning might have been at that time when I put an unprotected penis into my mouth or rectum I knew the risk. And now, now, now, now I am Susan Hayward hollering aloud "I Want to Live!"

Yet, I have no regrets. At least that is what I am obliged to tell myself in order to make it through each day without losing my mind. My only regret is that I was born, or that I didn't have enough foresight when I was newly born to hang myself with the umbilical cord between my mother's bloody legs. I hope for a cure, but I have no hope. I would pray for a cure, but I have no religion. I would find the cure myself, but I have no will. I have a sedative, which I take to fight my insomnia. Sleep, however, no matter how sound, does not bring peace of mind, for I know that I am doomed to awaken to face another day in a world that I have come to despise. Not so for the final sleep. It will embrace me, as it does us all, in eternal darkness. Tonight, though, I am afraid to die.

And so it is in the morning when I awake as well, for after rising reluctantly from my single bed I descend the stairs to see if the mail has come. It is a cold, lonely, foreboding, and precarious world I conclude for no particular reason other than the mood upon which I awoke. There is nothing for me but a five hundred dollar phone bill. I am a fool. I am a freak. I am frustrated. I am fatigued. I am furious. I am fucked. I am on fire.

Chapter Six

Dear Mr. Clover-Cook: Please find enclosed a check for five thousand dollars as an advance against the royalties of your most recent novel The Search for the Reincarnated Romeo

and Juliet, which my staff and myself all believe has the most marketing potential and is best suited to be released prior to your other novels...

As though it were the fourth of July upon which I was inclined to celebrate, I shouted a series of words which were only a prelude to the way I fully expressed my elation, by bouncing on my bed until it broke, by jumping up and down on the hardwood floor until my feet hurt, and by spinning around in circles until I was dizzy. Sitting down at my desk I looked at the contract I was holding in my hand along with the check and the letter, until at last I was calm enough to continue reading the latter. We are all very excited about your novels, and allow me, Mr. Clover-Cook, to apologize for it having taken so long to respond, but as you're aware you sent us a great deal of material to read. Allow me also to state that in my professional opinion it is a great deal of very good material that is bound to find it's way into the mainstream...

Money and praise all in one envelope. What more could a hungry unread writer want? I was thrilled. I was overjoyed. I was ecstatic. I could not have been happier had the check I was still clinging onto been a multi-million dollar lottery ticket, as opposed to what could be considered, if one were cynical enough to do so, a measly five thousand dollars, for when broken down accordingly, to cover ten years of labour, I was being paid approximately a quarter of a cent per hour. Of course there was still the future royalties to consider, of which I was now sure there would be hordes of, and oodles and oodles of other accolades as well.

Now as you know we are a new and rather small publishing house, but conceivably over a short period of time, depending in part upon the sales of your first novel, we hope to publish all of your work...

Because I began to cry, I guessed at the time that I was overcome with gratitude, relief, and a sense of glee. It was not only the money that made me so happy. It was the fact that someone in this cold, lonely, foreboding, and precarious world had finally seen some worth in my life's work. Furthermore, I then felt certain that my books were no longer going to perish in oblivion. It was with a feeling of absolute well-being that I finished reading the letter.

Again, we are all extremely excited here at The First Time Publishing Company about your novels and I am personally looking forward to discussing with you in detail some very minor revisions.

Sincerely yours,

Henry Post

Senior Editor & President

The First Time Publishing Co.

On my way to the bank to cash the check I laughed out loud at the corner of a busy intersection when I happened to recall how only a few hours ago I had been planning to set myself on fire. Set myself on fire? Ha. Ha. Ha. How insane the notion now seemed, and it gave me the greatest sense of relief to feel fate relinquish me from the horrifying hold it had had on me. I could then admit to myself how truly terrified I had been to incinerate myself in such a ghastly manner. Moreover, I would no longer have to sacrifice myself in any manner

whatsoever. As it were I had set myself on fire ten years ago when I began my first novel, and now, now, now, now I am about to set the world on fire, or so I was foolish enough to think as I skipped across the street that sunny summer day that stands out in my mind as one moment of joy amidst a lifelong maelstrom of misery. Amen.

Chapter Seven

It was on the bus to New York City when I began this novella. Being that I was on my way to meet my publisher I was in a cheerful mood and had no desire to commit suicide. I was even contemplating quitting smoking. I wanted to live long enough at the very least to work with an editor on all the novels. The mere idea of doing so delighted me to such a degree that during the entire trip a smile seemed permanently fixed on my face, and so much so the person sitting beside me remarked, "You certainly are a happy sort," which I found strange since all my life people have been telling me to "Smile."

My smile did languish some while gazing at the countryside that I was leaving behind. I felt a small amount of regret for having given up my room in Provincetown. I had grown fond of the resort town with it's steady flow of unfamiliar faces. Mrs. Poulopoulos had seemed sorry to see me go, and since we had barely spoken to each other during my one year stay I was rather surprised. "You were a good tenant," she told me, but this was before she knew of my having broken the bed that belonged to her. "My son will be sorry to hear that you have gone. He always asks about you whenever he calls," she added, which was the real reason for my feelings of abandonment aboard the bus bound for New York City. Was I leaving behind the man of my dreams? Probably not, and was there still a man of my dreams? Did Greco Poulopoulos dream about men to begin with? And if he did did he dream about me in particular? Probably not, though I would never know. My smile did return, but this time it was twisted and so cynical in nature had the person sitting next to me noticed I may have been subjected to some inquire about the sudden change in my demeanour. "Well, sir, on the surface I am happy that my books have been recognized," I might have been forced to explain to the man, for it was a man that was seated next to me, "but I would have given up writing long ago for the love of a good man." I knew that the man sitting next to me was not the man of my dreams for he had a wedding ring on his finger. And later during a moment of clarity and free of self-deception I also knew that Greco Poulopoulos and myself were never meant to be.

Although I had used the city for the setting in several of my novels, and even though I had spent many hours studying a map of the city to research my settings, I did not know my way around New York. I knew I was at the Port Authority Bus Terminal in Manhattan. What I didn't know was where The First Time Publishing Company was located or where I was going to spend the night. I had plenty of time, however, to figure these things out for my appointment with Henry Post was not until the following day. At the moment it was midafternoon and ninety degrees in the shade if not a hundred or more with the humidity. All I wanted was a shower, a nap, and some vegetarian nuggets, not necessarily in that order. I wanted the nuggets first. In fact, I wanted them now. I was famished, but since I was unable to find a vegetarian restaurant right away I settled for a spinach salad in a place that specialized in steak. I was abhorred to give "the cow killers" my money, so I suppose that I must have been more hungry than I was abhorred. During my habitual after dinner coffee, and while enduring the stench of a cow as it

cooked on an open grill only a few feet away from where I was sitting, I thought briefly about going back to Canada. Now that I had secured a publisher I was free to leave, for finding someone to publish my books was the only reason for my having come to the United States. By the time I had drained my coffee cup, and by the time the blood had been desiccated from the slab of meat on the grill, I had made up my mind to make the move back to Canada. I would get an apartment in Toronto or Vancouver where I would begin taking very good care of myself. It was while paying my bill when it occurred to me that perhaps with a little effort I could become a positive person. Maybe all this time I had just needed something to feel positive about? Then, having previously decided to do so, I left the restaurant strutting self-righteously. "Blood sucking carnivores," I called out quite loud enough for the proprietor and many of the murderous patrons to hear. Once outside, I dismissed the idea I had earlier of going to a movie or a Broadway show. I did not know where Broadway Avenue was or even where the closest movie theater was located. I was not feeling adventuresome, and furthermore it was dusk and I did not feel secure enough to roam the streets of New York at night. Instead I found an expensive hotel room, which the following day I found out was only two blocks away from The First Time Publishing Company. That night, though, after having my shower I tried to do some revisions that I knew were needed on my novel The Search for the Reincarnated Romeo and Juliet, but instead I fell asleep in a chair that was far too comfortable for me to exert any discipline over myself. I did, however, with the manuscript just mentioned on my lap and with my five other novels spread about my feet, have a dream.

It began in a beige and blue and brown colored banquet room. Six large mahogany tables, one for each of my soon to be best- selling books, were situated three on either side of a walkway which was covered with a red carpet trimmed with gold brocades that lead from the main entrance to the stage. It was the stage upon which I stood in front of a wooden podium where a microphone had been placed for my disposal. From there I was able to see the many characters of my own creation, who were all looking upon me waiting impatiently it seemed for me to speak and to explain why they had been summoned from the pages of each of my novels. "Thank you all for coming," I announced into the microphone that amplified my words manyfold across the banquet room.

The various characters, all gathered together for this joyous occasion, clapped and cheered, and for many moments I stood immersed in my own silence mesmerized by their adulation. I was delighted to see Kyle Reeves and then at another table another Kyle only slightly older and more refined and belonging to another book. Brenden Michaels, Kyle's lover from my first book was present, as was Clover O'Gotten, Kyle's lover at a later date and in another book. Mona Babcock, my most beloved murderess, was seated with Raven and Rebecca and several other anthropomorphic animal characters. Barbra Lovenstein, and her husband the wife beater Michael Burrows, were there from My Gothic Romance. Lascivious, Semen, Ovary, the Baby Jesus, and host of others from my book A Dramatist and His Dialogue with the Devil were all sitting at another table. Alpha, Omega, and the two young protagonists referred to as Romeo and Juliet were seated with several others at the table nearest the stage, since The Search for the Reincarnated Romeo and Juliet was the novel I wrote most recently. In a short time I observed that every character I had ever created from major to minor was present in the room, and that my alter ego, in a variety of disguises, was mingled amongst them. There was the environmentally concerned Johnathan Crimson Clover-Cook, whose cameo in A Raven in New York City had served as an introduction to myself stepping inside a novel as it were. Then there

was John, the artsy prostitute turned playwright from my third novel, and there I was again known throughout my fourth novel as simply J. C. There was John from The Cure of the Crimson Colored Clover, covered with Kaposi's Sarcoma, sitting at yet another table. And there was one more John, only this time I was disguised as a reporter searching for the reincarnated Romeo and Juliet. Standing there on the stage staring at my many selves I wondered if my successors would see that these characters were only fragments of myself?

"Everyone, could I have your attention please. First of all permit me to say that it feels like a very long time since I've seen many of you and I must add while I have the opportunity that I've missed you all very much. Many times I've wanted to do a rewrite just so that I could revisit each and every one of you. Now, I know you've been waiting for a long time to be published, some of you longer than others, and I'm sure that many of you have given up hope altogether of ever being read by the public, but I have some very good news. I would like to introduce you to the person that is going to publish you. Everyone, I would like you to meet Mr. Post, or as I prefer to call him, Mr. Posterity." Every character that I have ever created all cheered when Henry Post from The First Time Publishing Company came from back stage and stood next to me by the podium.

"Bravo! Bravo!" I could hear my characters shouting just before Mr. Posterity leaned over the microphone and welcomed the banquet room full of fictitious characters into the world of great literature, and I awoke with a smile.

Chapter Eight

"Come in, please, Mr. Clover-Cook. Have a seat. Can I have my secretary get you something to drink? Coffee? Tea? Some mineral water?"

"I'm fine, thank you."

"I must say, sir, what a pleasure it is to meet you in person."

"Likewise."

"How was your trip to New York?"

"Boring. I took the bus."

"Where are you staying?"

"The Waldorf=Astoria."

"That's a very nice hotel and not far from here, but it's very expensive."

"Yes, but I was too tired to find a cheaper place. And besides I have an affinity for the hotel because I used it as the setting for one of my novels. Plus, I just happened upon it and since I don't know my way around New York..."

"Well, after I tell you what I'm afraid I must you might decide to leave the city. First, though, I'd like to express once again how much I admire your novels."

"You make it sound as though you've read all of them?"

"As a matter of fact, I have. I just finished your first Kyle Reeves. I read them in the reverse order that you wrote them. Now where was I?"

"You said you had something to tell me, Mr. Post, and by the tone of your voice I'd say it's

something unsavory."

"Yes, I suppose it is just that. It was certainly distressing news. I just found out for myself yesterday afternoon. Unfortunately, you had already left Provincetown so I had no way of stopping you."

"What is it?" I asked without trying to hide the fact that I was overcome with fear of whatever might be the worse.

"It seems that things are not going well. Actually, our accountants have informed us that things are going very poorly. Our last three releases have not sold and since we're such a small publishing house their commercial failure has put us in the red."

"Which means you can't publish my books?"

"I'm afraid not, and I'm very sorry. As much as I admire your work you must know that they all carry a certain amount of risk. Your books, as good as I believe them to be, are all rather off the wall. Are you all right? You look pale. Can I get you a glass of water?'

"No, but could I have that book of matches that's on your desk?"

"Certainly. Do you need an ashtray?"

"No, I'd just like to keep them if you don't mind?"

"Yes, of course and you can keep the advance as well. Perhaps, in the future if some other publisher hasn't already snapped you up we'll be able to do business. But, I'm sure that one of the larger publishing houses will be more than eager to sign you on as their latest literary discovery in which case it will be our loss, and my personal regret."

As I'm sure anyone reading this novella can imagine I was numb when I left Henry Post's office. Indeed, I was devastated, and I might have been disbelieving as well if I wasn't so accustomed to being disappointed.

Upon returning to my previously paid hotel room, which I could no longer afford, my former fantasy of setting myself on fire reoccurred. Furthermore, there was no doubt in my mind that I was going to do it the following day. Destiny had decided for me and had even gone so far as to bring me to the setting. All I had to do was sit by the hotel room window, staring at the lights of the city, and wait for the morning to arrive. Sitting there as I did for several hours that on the one hand seemed never ending and on the other they seemed to pass by far too quickly, I could see myself on tomorrow's evening news. My death was being broadcast around the world. I could hear the stricken sound of some newscaster's voice as he or she announced my "tragic" death. "Unknown novelist sets fire to himself on the steps of Manhattan's largest publishing conglomerate." Requests for my writing pour into the news station from publishers all around the world. The literary community is clamouring for my life's work. "Why didn't we notice how talented he was when he was alive?" they are asking themselves at my wake which has become a worldwide affair. "What a shame," they say when they lower my casket into the ground. "He was a wonderful writer," they proclaim during my eulogy. Or so I go on thinking until my daydream comes to an end when I awaken, as it were, to find myself alone in the hotel room facing the realities and the present perils of my perpetual anonymity. Closing my eyes, however, I force myself to fantasize some more, and by doing so I can hear the nation weep for the "terrible" loss of a great artist. In turn this causes my novels to be released so rapidly four or five or all six of them are concurrently on the New York Times bestseller list. My name becomes well known and synonymous with the word success. My beneficiaries become rich. My books become movies. My life becomes meaningful. I am compensated. I am alive. I am eternal. But then there is an unexpected twist to my daydream when powerful self-serving editors decide to make my

manuscripts "more commercial," and once again I am fucked. They fuck with my punctuation. They fuck with my syntax. They fuck with my storylines. They fuck up my characters. They edit the word "fuck" from my dialogue. "Well, fuck you all," I shout, but of course they can not hear me as I am dead, and thereafter I am unable to stop their mercenary meddling. It occurs to me that if I could I would take it all back. Every syllable. Every word. Every sentence. Every book. Oh, if only I were strong enough, brave enough, selfish enough, uncaring enough, to take my books with me into oblivion. Could I burn every copy in existence along with myself? Could I endow you world with nothing but ashes? No, I decide I could not, but I can destroy myself without further thought. And in fact I can see the striking of the match as clearly as if in my mind there was a miniature television set tuned to the channel of my self-destruction. The moment the match is lit I explode into a fireball. My painful pilgrimage is played out for several agonizing minutes that seem to me like an eternal damnation. My only regret, however, is my mother whom I know is in her living room watching as she always does the six o'clock evening news.

Feeling fortified by fate, with an unwavering willpower and with some money from the advance given to me for my most recent novel I get up, go out, and buy three gallons of gasoline so that soon after I can commence with my campaign of setting the world on fire.

Chapter Nine

My mood is as combustible as my intent the following morning when I awaken from what had been a restless sleep. I am too depressed to shower, shave, or comb my hair. I have no appetite for breakfast and with no reason to take more clothes with me than what I am wearing I leave my luggage and all of my personal belongings behind. Copies of my manuscripts and the can of gasoline are the only things that I take with me when I check out of the hotel. Knowing the hot and the horrible hardship that lies ahead I find myself anxiety ridden and short of breath as I walk towards my destination. The publishing house that I have picked is only a few blocks from the First Time Publishing Company, which I pass by without averting my gaze from the sidewalk. The can of gasoline that I am carrying has become heavy. I hoist the sack it is concealed in over my shoulder. It's not much further, I keep on telling myself until I find myself facing from across the street the site that is to be the end of my self. Next to where I am standing there is a pay phone which I use to call several news stations whose numbers I have written down on the book of matches that I got from Henry Post. His is the last call that I make. "Hold onto the manuscripts," I tell him. "Just make sure you keep them," I add after he asks me why. "You'll know why soon enough," I say and then I slam the receiver down.

The publishing house is small in comparison to many of the other buildings in the surrounding area. Built less than a decade ago it is only twenty five stories high, but it's reputation for publishing quality literature is what has lead me to it's doorstep. Not far from the pay phone there is an alleyway which I take refuge in to douse myself and copies of my manuscripts with the gasoline. Leaving the empty gas can in the alley I cross the street, and it is not until I get all the way to the other side when I realize that I forgot the book of matches by the pay phone. After going back to retrieve them I retrace my steps which is easily done since my drenched person previously dripped a trail of gasoline. Ten minutes have gone by since I called the news stations. Saying a prayer aloud for them to come I have just uttered the word "please"

when to my amazement they begin arriving. As in my frequently aforementioned fantasy I scatter the manuscripts about my feet. I now notice that pedestrians passing by on the sidewalk fifteen feet from where I am standing are beginning to look upon me strangely. Many have even stopped to stare. News teams are taking their video cameras out of their various vans. "Who are you?" one of the reporters asks hurriedly as he moves closer, but not so near that he is in any danger.

"Johnathan Crimson Clover-Cook," I reply. My name is not recognized and every one of the reporters seems puzzled and disappointed, for on the phone I had been sure to stress that I was a world famous novelist that was going to turn himself into a human torch.

"Why are you doing this?" the same reporter asked as a police car pulled up onto the curb between myself and the crowd that had gathered to see if the guy soaked in gasoline had enough guts to do it.

I could not think of anything appropriate to say, so I tore a match from the book in reply. Any remark made now only a moment before my demise would be the last I ever made. Such pressure prevented me from speaking. Maybe I just couldn't answer the question with the honesty that the occasion called for, and I could hardly leave this world in a blaze of glory as I was, by saying, "Uh, I don't know why."

So, instead of saying something insignificant I smiled contemptuously for the cameras, emphatically closed my eyes, struck the match dramatically, and let the flaming little stick fall by my feet. I had been expecting a great surge of heat to rise up and engulf me. For several months I had been preparing myself mentally for the pain, so I was more than surprised when I felt nothing at all. Then upon opening my eyes the first thing I saw was the match lying by my left foot entirely intact. It had not lit. This time with my eyes open I tried another, but for some reason it was faulty as well. More desperately I tore two or three at the same time from the book, but none of them ignited. Now what? It was the only book I had. Why weren't they working? They weren't wet except for a small amount of gasoline that had gotten onto them, but as a teenager I had learned that matches even if they are soaked in gasoline will still ignite. Without looking up I could sense that the two policemen were well aware of my predicament. I am doomed. I am disgraced. I am despairing. "Does anybody have a light?" I asked, looking up at the crowd. Even if somebody had been sympathetic enough to offer me a match it was too late, for I was quickly accosted by both policemen and put to the ground, as though I, Johnathan Crimson Clover-Cook, were a criminal. Struggle, curse, and threaten as I did I was no match for the two officers as they hand-cuffed me and then dragged me into their cruiser.

Finally, "my fiasco" as I have come to call it, was mentioned very briefly on the news that night. My name was never revealed, though, nor to the best of my knowledge did any publisher ever inquire about my work. To make matters much worse the news caster had the audacity to laugh when telling the world what had transpired at noon hour on the steps of the publishing house. "Some failed hack who couldn't get published thought he could get noticed if he set himself on fire, but the loser didn't even have enough talent to light a match. Ha. Ha. Ha."

Chapter Ten

Could I have a light?

Where did you get that cigarette? You can't smoke in here.

Then let me out.

You can't leave until I decide you're no longer a danger to yourself.

And who the fuck are you?

I'm your doctor.

Yeah, well, fuck you.

How long have you been having this fantasy?

To bash in your face? About five minutes.

You told the police that brought you here that you've been fantasizing for some time about setting yourself on fire.

Where the hell am I?

You're at Bellevue hospital.

Why is there a video camera on the wall?

It's so that we can keep a close eye on you.

You mean I'm under suicide watch?

You tried to set yourself on fire.

Could you take off these restraints? They're hurting my wrists.

If you promise to remain calm. You put up quite a fight earlier. We had to sedate you. There, is that better?

Yeah, the freedom feels great. Now, give me a fucking light, and some God damn gasoline, you fucking bastard.

Why do you want to die? Is it because of the AIDS?

How do you know I have AIDS?

We did some blood work while you were asleep, because you threatened to infect one of the policemen.

Did I? I don't remember.

Is it the reason for your trying to set fire to yourself?

No, doc, I don't want to die because I have AIDS. I got AIDS because I've wanted to die for over a decade. It's easier to catch than cancer.

And do you still want to die?

No, and that's the funny thing about it. In fact, I'm going to laugh about it all the way to my fucking grave. But at least now when I kill myself it can be called euthanasia, so maybe hell won't be as hot.

Do you believe you're going to hell?

The only hell is right here on earth. As a matter of fact this fucking hospital is probably the pit of hell, and you, doc, are likely the fucking devil.

Why do you feel so much contempt?

Hating everything around you makes the prospect of dying less painful.

You're very cynical sounding, as though at some point in your life you were deeply hurt by someone you cared about?

How can you call yourself a doctor? You're not a doctor of anything except idiocy. Don't you know that no one can hurt us unless we give them the power to? My problem, though, is that I gave too many people the power who were unworthy. So, you see, doc, it was I who hurt myself, repeatedly.

Are you referring to relationships?

It doesn't matter anymore what I'm referring to. All you need to know is that I despise life. I

hate the whole premise of it from beginning to end. Like I've said before my only regret is that I didn't have enough foresight when I was newly born to hang myself with the umbilical cord between my mother's bloody legs. End of session.

And to my yet to be discovered readership let me say in closing that you are right in assuming that I still don't have a publisher, or anyone even remotely interested in my writing. I am still living, though for how long it is hard to say, but who among us knows when out lives are going to end? I might live longer than the doctor sitting next to me. He could get hit by a bus on his way home from the hospital. I am hopeful, as I hope that everyone reading this novella gets run over by a bus. Oh, come now, dear readers, don't feign such shock, or take to chastising me in such a malicious manner. Don't waste your precious time, for I know better than anyone that this is Not, A Very Nice Novella.

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BOOK ONE

A Gift From the Great Beyond

Opening night in New York City the theater is packed. The air is alive with anticipation. People are coming in droves from all across the country to see my play. A play that was destined, on the day of its creation, to become the most talked about play in the history of the human race. Now, undoubtedly, you are wondering why? Well, before I reveal to the whole world, the reason for the success of the above mentioned, I have to make the following confession. I feel like a plagiarist calling the play mine when in reality it was actually God who wrote it. But, decidedly, I am the designated dramatist chosen by God to pass the play onto the people, so I suppose it is safe to assume the good Lord does not object to me putting my name on it. Nonetheless, the Lord is said to be omniscient, so surely He or She already knows that I am a narcissistic novelist accustomed to having my own way.

Standing inside the theater on opening night in the year 1999 (one hour before the unforeseen Second Coming of Christ) I am smoking a cigarette. It is Christmas day and there are several presents being passed around by various people backstage. Having no gifts for the cast or crew I am in the process of trying to make myself look as inconspicuous as possible when suddenly a stagehand, who has his back to me, spins around and surreptitiously informs me that there is a long line up of people all around the block. I am taken aback, since I saw for myself, upon entering the theater, a sign on the ticket booth that clearly states the play is sold out. The well-informed stagehand further enlightens me to the fact that there are no seats to be had until after the New Year. "The year 2000," he tells me unnecessarily, as he raises both of his bushy black eyebrows. He also mentions enigmatically that "after the curtain rises acts of unprecedented evil will follow and the wickedness of what you have written will be revealed."

"Furthermore," he ventures on to say, "the nation will be shocked by what happens onstage and the Second Coming of Christ will be as diabolical as the Devil himself." Strangely enough, however, after tonight the stagehand will never be seen again.

Having carefully quoted the stagehand's proclamations about the play I do believe my duty to the reader, in regards to differential documentation, is done, and I shall, if I can, refrain from any further mention of his vehement remarks. Instead I will passionately promote the play with a dogged determination - providing that is the providence that it deserves? Said to be the most eagerly awaited play of the season, and possibly the most publicized play of the century, I am certain it's self- explanatory title has something to do with the publics intense interest and with the procession of people presently pouring into the theater. "Like a flock of sacrificial lambs being led to slaughter by a malevolent shepherd," is another statement made by the stagehand that I can't keep from mentioning. Written in large elaborate and illustrious lights on the monstrous marquee outside the theater for all of New York City to see - CHRIST: THE SEQUEL, the play is called and for reasons, which even I was unaware of until after opening night. For a thorough recount of opening night I should mention that even the principle players and the supporting cast are nervous. They can not believe the commotion the play has caused, the crowds of people that have come, or the dark ominous cloud that has reportedly been hanging directly over the theater since the dawn of this day. I am hoping, however halfheartedly, that the cloud looming overhead, like a large stationary puff of acrid smoke from some gigantic

cigar, is nothing more than a coincident. Yet, earlier in the evening I noticed that not even the search lights that were systematically set up for this momentous occasion have the ability to break through even the perimeter of the black cloud. It's density throughout the day is undiminished, while it's mysterious presence continues to cause a colossal amount of concern. The cast is conscious of there being something very uncanny about the cloud and might I add that most of them are extremely worried by the "weird" way in which is hovers. "Where did it come from?" the are all eager to learn. "There must be some kind of cosmic connection," several of the more spiritual members of the cast and crew have said. "It's weird," remark the rest.

At the moment, however, the majority of the actors are in their dressing rooms getting ready for their premiere performance, which is much more tension filled than the dress rehearsals of the days before. While they put on their costumes and some final touches of greasepaint the audience gathers anxiously in the auditorium. I am still standing in the wings watching the people, as they take their prospective seats, but it is the hustle and bustle backstage that makes me remember how it all began one Sunday afternoon while strolling through Central Park... Right away my reminiscent thoughts are interrupted by the pragmatically impatient producer of the play. He pats me on the back. "John, all this publicity is a God send. It's marvelous, but I can't help wondering if they really are expecting the Second Coming of Christ? What with all those rumors running around Manhattan about your being a prophet much like Muhammad."

"I'm a playwright, not a prophet, and if they are hoping for the real Messiah to make an onstage appearance there are going to be a great many disappointed theatergoers."

"Well, I tried to hire him, but not even the best casting agent in New York City can get Jesus Christ to make a command performance on such short notice. He has to come all the way from heaven and it's hard getting a chariot at this time of year." He stops talking long enough to laugh at what he believes to be his wry sense of humor. "But just the same he hasn't been portrayed on Broadway in such a big way since the original production of Jesus Christ Superstar thirty some odd years ago." Again he laughs, but this time he leaves as well, and once more I am left alone with my thoughts, though never for long. Presently, I am approached by the dramatically dressed director of this extravaganza. He is wearing a custom made cape, which conceals the disproportionate shape of his body; and a hat, which completely covers the shiny scalp of his hairless head. Unlike the producer, the director does not pat me on the back. His preference is to pinch my derriere, as though it were his to do so with. "Bad news, the stage manager just phoned in sick. He's got the flu and can't get out of bed, so we're on our own for tonight. By the way, where's your boy friend?" he ask salaciously. "I thought he'd be here holding your hand and giving you moral support?"

"Do you mean Lascivious?"

"Yeah, who else would I mean?"

"He's in Los Angeles. He left late last night," I tell the director, though I do not reveal the reason for Lascivious's leaving, nor do I allow the tone of my voice to convey my heartbreak.

Lascivious (the love of my life) left a letter at the front desk of my hotel that said how sorry he was that he could not make the opening of my play after promising me many times that he would be here. Reminded of his absence and of his unexpected departure I presently retrieve the letter from my pocket reluctantly, for I know that it is not necessary for me to read the letter again. Still, I am unable to stop myself.

"Dear John, although..." I look away from the letter like I did the first time I read it and again

I ask myself the same thing. Why did he have to begin the letter with the word "although"? It instantly told me that whatever followed would be bad news and sure enough it was. "...although I love you very much I feel that were are becoming too deeply attached to each other and a long term relationship is not what I am looking for at this time of my life. I have been offered a one year contract with an advertising agency in Los Angeles. After much soul searching I have decided to accept their generous offer. Living on the west coast, at least for a short while, will give us both an opportunity to see more clearly where this love affair is leading. Have faith in me my friend I will stay in touch and you will certainly be the first person I see when I return to New York in a years time. Good luck with the play. Sorry I missed your opening night. Knock em dead. Love Lascivious."

I knew from the first time I saw Lascivious at a nightclub in New York City that destiny had brought us together for a reason. With Madonna crooning "Crazy For You" in the background our eyes met from across the room and through the smoke filled air, and I can speak for Lascivious as well when I say that it was love at first sight. It was, we choose to believe, the most magical meeting possible between two people. Foremost, for my falling in love with Lascivious, is the fact that he has an angelic face. Long locks of gold colored hair cover his perfectly contoured head. He has a smile that could light up most of midtown Manhattan and the laughter to match. His beautiful blue eyes evoke so much warmth and compassion I am convinced they could melt the coldest of hearts, which, more often than not, is how many have described mine to be. I think one of the first questions that I asked him, after we were formally introduced by a mutual friend at the nightclub, who was intuitive enough at the time to mention something about it being "a match made in heaven," was how he came to possess such an unusual (not to mention lustful) name?

"The name Lascivious," he explained over the loud music with the most hypnotic voice that I had ever heard, "was a legacy left to me by my father." Then he looked away without saying anything more on the subject, so I lit a cigarette and abandoned the idea of asking him his surname. By and large I learned his reasons for falling in love with me and there were much less academic than mine. "I like the way you write," was one of the first compliments he paid me. And prior to commenting on his physical infatuation for me he also mentioned how much he admired my "literary" mind.

Now, on opening night, I wish with all my heart that Lascivious was here with me to hold my hand the way he does whenever we are together. Being that he is my best friend I can not help feeling forsaken. Not only is he the most trustworthy ally that I have ever had he is also the only lover that I have ever had. Furthermore, as I so often tell him, he is as loyal as a lap dog, for he is the only person on the planet that I can confide in. I tell him all my secrets and so far he has never divulged one word that I have whispered to him, even though the press is always asking him questions about me, and about my less than perfect past, which I painstakingly try to protect. I have gone to great measures to keep the world from finding out that prior to the publication of my second novel I was a prostitute. Only Lascivious knows everything there is to know about me, but no matter how much he is hounded by reporters trying to pry into the private personal life of a writer, Lascivious remains, I reiterate, as loyal as a lap dog. It was shortly after the publication of my second novel (an all too important book if you must know, because of it's environmental message) when we met in the nightclub. We went to my hotel room when the club closed and there we made love for the first time. We had both been drinking so it did not take us long to get undressed and into bed, but the chemistry between us

was far more conducive to our lovemaking than were the couple of cocktails we consumed at the nightclub, our erotic conversation, or the marijuana cigarette we shared in the cab.

Again I am interrupted from my romantic reverie. This time the interruption is brought about by one of the actors. It is the actor playing the part of a character called "Embryo" to be precise, and like usual he is late. A Thespian with thinning hair in his early thirties he has a penchant for altering his lines, which makes him a liability to any self-respecting playwright. "Sorry I'm late," he shouts to me as he races by.

"I'm sorry you are in the play at all." I mutter to myself. Harboring an enormous amount of hatred for the man I glare at the back of his head. But hate being the harshest of all emotions I shall free myself from that proverbial hook by simple saying to you that I do not like the man. To begin with the character Embryo is an extraordinarily bad person, and I have a feeling that the actor playing the part of the "evil Embryo" could give him at least one lesson in the evildoing department. I can not count the number of times he has terrorized me with his insensitivity to the term "artistic integrity." As an example he was picked for the part in the play, because he brazenly seduced the director's diffident, and far from being pretty looking, sister. It was not until after he had swept her off her feet (all two hundred and fifty pounds of her) that he auditioned for the director. Needless to say I have nothing against prostitution. In the past, and in commiseration, I have often imagined myself to be a modern day male Mary Magdalene, and moreover, in moments of sheer madness, I think I am the modern day male Madonna as well, but that belongs in another book and probably not a novel the general public is open-minded enough to purchase? Clearly, my qualm with "Embryo" is much more pernicious than his being a prostitute, since I would have had sex with the owners of ever publishing house on the planet had that been the only way for me to get my manuscript into print. No, it is the infamous form of prostitution that he is practicing which infuriates me, for after all did the director's sister know his motives for going to bed with her? No she did not. Was there an open exchange of favors between the two parties prior to their fornication? No there was not. There was only a precarious plan hatched in the actor playing the part of Embryo's head to get the part. Yet, no matter how many times I try to tell the director that Embryo is treacherous, unscrupulous, and not the type to be trusted, he accuses me of having "a suspicious mind." Then he threatens to bar me from backstage if I mention the matter one more time. Having no desire to assert a threat of my own, and with nothing more than my intuition to base my suspicions on I have stopped harping on the subject. Though I often wonder if the director had known how my gut feelings rarely need any kind of confirmation (because I believe they come with a kind of God given guarantee) would he have done something about Embryo before it was far too late for everyone involved? Moreover, my mistrust of Embryo, however it may have emerged, is supported by the fact that he has dark devilish eyes, the deceptive way he combs his curly brown hair to cover his balding crown, and the fact that only yesterday during the final dress rehearsal I heard how cold-heartedly he dumped the spellbound sister. "Well I tried to warn you, but you wouldn't listen."

"You were right. I should have listened to you, but he came so highly recommended," the director said in his own defense.

Embryo did, however much I hate to admit it, come highly recommended by the casting agent and he has a long list of credits to his name both On and Off Broadway including the lead role in Eugene O'neill's Desire Under the Elms. Frankly, I find it hard to believe it was as noteworthy a performance as the critics claimed it to be, because in my opinion he can not act

well enough to have ever been cast in such a classic as Desire Under the Elms. It seems improbable to me, even if he had the role of the elm tree, but I am just the poorly paid playwright, so what do I know?

I know that very soon the curtain will rise and the house lights will go down in what I believe will be a blase of unmitigated glory. But when, Esther, the wardrobe lady, who claims to be clairvoyant, walks willfully by me without saying a word it makes me wonder if there is more going on backstage than a novice and a none psychic like myself can see? Surely, I think to myself, the rambling on of that sanctimonious stagehand are not to be taken seriously? I turn my attention reluctantly back to Esther and as always I am stupefied by her abrasive behavior. She is a strong looking woman in her mid forties if the faint lines on her face are any indication. Her shoulder length brown hair with it's streaks of gray are indeed another sure sign of how many candles she's required to put on her birthday cake. Wearing eye glasses with thick prescription lenses and large black frames, along with an enormous amount of eye make-up, cause her, in my opinion, to look like a racoon. Far more troublesome to me than her physical features is the fact that every time we meet I get the impression that she dislikes me more and more. Could it be that she is one of those homophobic types who think that homosexuals all have a home in hell waiting for them right after a long lingering agonizing death from some dilapidating highly deserved disease? "It could be. The world is weighted down with people like that," Lascivious says, and he could be right in regards to Esther, but I am more inclined to believe that she does not like me because of the play. I can not help noticing that every time she sees me she clutches the silver cross, she wears around her neck, like a weapon. Perhaps, for reasons which I have not yet had an opportunity to reveal to you reverent and rapacious readers, she finds the play somewhat sacrilegious. But, I protest to anyone who complains about the premise of the play, primarily because it is not my play. I am the person picked by God, period! "And do you swear to that on a stack of Bibles?" I will be asked by a pious group of people not long after the play premieres.

"I swear it was certainly never my intention to be the least bit blasphemous and if I have been well may I be stoned by the saints of society," I say to the crowd and then sarcastically I add, "if any can be found in New York City in the year 1999?"

Esther glances in my direction, but again she does not acknowledge my presence. I see she is carrying the doll that will be used all during the third act in place of the "Baby Jesus." I watch while Esther passes the doll to one of the prop people. Then a slow moving stagehand helps another prop person make some last minute changes on the set. The changes are small enough that none of the actors will be unable to find their mark, but they are important enough to make the scenery look all the more realistic. "Put some more dirty dishes on the kitchen counter in one apartment and make sure the counter in the other kitchen is sparkling clean," I suggest to the prop person. "And why aren't the curtains on the kitchen windows open? The audience won't be able to see the fake thunderstorm," I say sternly, for I am not a playwright that shrinks like a violet when facing adversity, nor do I cringe when the occasion calls for courage. More to the point I have a pushy personality and I pride myself on being a powerhouse that speaks my mind without displaying even the smallest amount of modesty. Nevertheless, the producer, the director, the stage manager, and all of the cast and crew know that I am really nothing more than a narcissistic novelist accustomed to having my own way. "You can be nice when you want to be," Lascivious says.

"Neanderthals, don't forget to put the backdrops of the city skyline behind those windows." I

am in the midst of warning the stagehands about the scenery when two of the actors rush up to me, as though I were a football on the forty yard line. One of them is playing the part of "the doctor" while the other one plays, and quite well too I must add, a character named "John." The doctor has a question about his one and only line. "When I announce "It's a boy" should I say it with meaning or matter-of- factly?"

I am duly impressed by his zeal and his professional attitude, for although it is the only line he has in the entire play and he is onstage for no more than a minute he is determined to make the moment memorable. It is refreshing to find an actor so eager and unpretentious and so unlike the leading lady, who thinks of herself as a star on and off the stage - and it has been said that she fantasizes about her fame while she is sitting on the toilet too. "There is no such thing as a small part only a small actor," I inform the doctor. "Say it with meaning. Say it with as much meaning as you can muster. Say it so people taking a nap in upstate New York can hear you."

The actor playing the part of John has a more serious problem. He is a heterosexual man playing the part of a homosexual. "I can't decide if I should swagger or swish when I make my entrance in the first act? The director doesn't seem to care."

"Don't do either. Just walk like a human being. Keep putting one foot in front of the other until you hit your mark."

Relaxing just a little as I light another cigarette I listen intently to the chatter of the audience when I notice the leading man. Forgive the lameness of the following analogy, but like a lion he comes charging out of the dressing room. When he spots me standing by myself he steers himself in my direction. The words "leave me alone" are on my lips and I am ready to release them when at the last moment I chew them up and swallow them along with a philosophical pill (prescribed to me by the physician Father Time) called "patience." He has such a pleasant personality it is practically impossible to be impolite. Choking on some smoke caught in my throat I can see that he is wearing his costume. A costume that consists of a suit and a tie. He is playing the part of the character I decided, after a great deal of deliberation, to call "Lascivious." Without a doubt he is one of the main characters in the play, with of course the exception of the Baby Jesus. As I look at the actor I discern no more than a few similarities to my lover Lascivious. They are both large men with long blond hair and they are both good looking, but as far as I can tell the only other thing they seem to have in common is the name. With my gaze fixed upon him I find myself fantasizing that the character Lascivious is a young Laurence Olivier. Sometimes I am also prone to imagine that "Semen," another colorful character in the play, is the masculine Marlon Brando in A Streetcar Named Desire. "Ovary" played by the leading lady is Semen's slightly seductive wife and mother of the Messiah, but in my mind she is a beautiful ballerina on Broadway starring in Swan Lake.

Smoking my cigarette, and looking lazily into Lascivious's big brown eyes, I find myself remembering very vividly the occasion when I looked lovingly into the real life Lascivious's big blue eyes and asked him for his permission to borrow his name for the play. Legally I did not need to ask him, for it is common knowledge that proper names (or perhaps even improper ones) are not considered copyrightable, but because of our friendship I felt that I should forewarn him first about my literary intentions, or at the very least inform him. I pointed out to him that it was not my play and that I had been forced to call the characters by their God given names, like "Embryo" as an example, for after all it was God who had created them.

Shaking my head I sigh and extinguish my cigarette, because even now amidst all the commotion backstage I can hear myself say, "Listen, Lascivious, I was wondering, would you

mind me using your name for a character in a play that I am writing?"

"Since when are you writing a play?"

I am not sure what to say. I have never told a soul about the extraordinary experience that impelled me to pen the play, so I stutter like somebody with a speech impediment over every syllable in the following simple sentence. "Since divine inspiration struck."

"I thought you were a novelist working assiduously on another book?"

"Well, I am, but you see I got struck by lightening last week, and..."

"You mean you were struck by inspiration?"

"No, no, I mean I was struck by a big bolt of lightening."

"You never mentioned it to me? What do you mean you got struck by lightening?"

"It's a long story, Lascivious. I'll tell you all about it some other time. Right now I need to know if I can use your name or not?"

"Of course. I don't have a patent on it."

"Good, because I've already finished the play and you might say I molded one of my main characters around you. My physical description fits you almost to a T. He's large like you and he has long blond hair like you and I guess you could say that in a way you were my model."

"I'm flattered, but are you trying to tell me that since I saw you last week you've finished writing a Broadway play?"

"You could say it came to me out of the blue, or better yet from the great beyond."

"Don't be coy. Isn't your publisher screaming for another novel?"

"He certainly is, but he will have to wait along with the rest of the world."

"Well, what's it about?"

"It's difficult to describe in detail. It's very complicated, and you know how I hate to talk about my writing beforehand with anyone." Lascivious knows that I have a rule about never allowing lovers, friends, or family to read my books before an agent or an editor. Criticism from someone close, even if correct, can be creatively destructive. And mark my words when I say I am not about to do a major rewrite on six or seven hundred pages of material on the word of my maid, because she is shocked by something I have written, or because she thinks the book should have a happy ending. And praise can be an even more devastating thing to deal with at too early a date. My propensity is to wait for the opinion of a professional, or more prudent and to the point several professionals, since opinions (in my opinion) be they right or wrong are better left unsaid, and reviews be they good or bad are better left unread. "I'll give you a clue. It concerns the Second Coming of Christ."

"Well, John, that's very timely as we approach the year 2000, the beginning of a new millennium, but I believe you're in way over your head."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I don't want to be the cloud that rains rejection slips on your parade, but aren't plays hard to find financial backing for and expensive to produce?"

"They certainly are," I say, suppressing a smile.

"Then why don't you stick with what you know?"

"I told you I was struck by lightening."

"Yes, I know from right out of the blue you were hit over the head by inspiration, but seriously why take a chance when you don't have to? You're already an extremely successful novelist. Stay in an area where you're safe. Why tread in dangerous water when you can continue walking on the surface without even getting the soles of your feet wet?"

"Are you hard of hearing?" I holler helplessly. "How many times do I have to tell you, Lascivious? I did not have any say whatsoever in the matter. I told you I was struck by lightening, and besides I've already found financial backing."

"Wait a minute. Are you trying to tell me that in one week you wrote a play and found someone to produce it?"

"Yes, Lascivious, that's exactly what I'm trying to tell you."

"Where? In the Catskill Mountains?"

"No, On Broadway."

"I think we had better sit down on that bench over there so you can tell me all about it, John. Now, start from the beginning. I want to hear the whole story."

There are hordes of people in Central Park on this particular day, even though the weather is not particularly pleasant. I wonder for a short while where they are all headed, until later when I learn there is a carnival going on in Columbus Circle. "Like I said, Lascivious, it all started when I was struck by a bolt of lightening. First of all I should mention it was not raining and there were no clouds whatsoever in the sky. The sun was shining. It was a beautiful day and I was walking through Central Park like I do ever Sunday afternoon as you know. I can vividly remember feeling a tingling sensation all over my body. Then my hair suddenly stood up on end and the next thing I know I was struck by a bolt of lightening from right out of the clear blue sky. Millions of volts of electricity went racing through my body. The last thing I remember is hearing a loud boom and being knocked to the ground. It's a miracle I wasn't killed..."

"John, are you making this up? I know all too well how your wild imagination works."

"No, I'm telling you the truth. Several people passing by were witnesses. Anyway, when I awoke I was lying prostrate on the ground. My clothes are burned. My hair is singed and smoking. And strangely enough there is a scar on my back in the shape of a lightening bolt which can not be scientifically explained."

"Do you still have it?"

I nod my head enthusiastically and the hat that I quite often wear falls off and lands on my lap.

"Let me see it," Lascivious says with a tone of voice that leads me to imagine that he has studied and has earned a degree or a doctrine in disbelief.

To satisfy his skepticism I take off my shirt and show him the zig zag shaped scar on my shoulder blade. "Now, do you believe me?"

He does not say anything right away. He waits until I have put my shirt back on. It is the first day of fall, but I am thinking it feels more like the middle of March when he tells me, "It's a tattoo, and you were probably drunk when you got it? That's why you don't remember."

"It's not a tattoo," I tell him. "Tattoos are done with ink and are smooth. You saw for yourself this scar is deeply indented. It's been scorched right into my flesh, and besides I was not drunk when it happened and I wasn't in a tattoo parlor. I was standing in Central Park not to far from here." After some further cross examination, from the lawyer living inside of Lascivious, I take him to the exact location, which is when I learn about the carnival.

"All right, so you were struck by lightening and survived. It's happened to lots of people. You were lucky. End of story."

"There's more to it than that. It was a miracle meant to happen, because when I stood up I saw the most amazing sight."

"What?" he wants to know, but I am reluctant to tell him. I am terrified of telling anyone at

the time and to be truthful even now I have to force my fingers into typing the spine tingling tale.

"There were two figures standing above me," I say at last to Lascivious.

"Policemen?"

I shake my head.

"Paramedics?"

I keep on shaking my head.

"A pair of pedestrians passing by?"

"No, no, no. You see they weren't actually standing, for their feet weren't touching the ground."

"They were floating?"

"Yes."

"You saw two figures floating in the air?" he asks, and if his voice had been deliberately filled with disbelief before, it is now emphatically raised to sound like the scoffing of a certified cynic.

"Yes," I reply.

"Well, who were they?"

"Angels."

"Oh, for God's sake, John."

"Precisely," I reply. "It was God's will. Anyway, the angels told me to return to my hotel room right away and to write a play. They said to call the play CHRIST: THE SEQUEL.

"Did anyone else see these angels?" he asks.

"No, and that's what makes it all the more miraculous. No one in the park could see them except me. They were invisible to everyone else and when I spoke out loud to the angels the people that were surrounding me, the ones who had seen me get struck by lightening, thought that I was delirious."

"You were probably hallucinating."

"No, I wasn't. They even told me their names."

"Which were?"

"Testosterone and Estrogen."

"So then what did you do?" Lascivious asks me with yet another one of his more or less disbelieving looks, but I note that the trenchant tone of his voice has subsided tremendously.

"I was stunned to say the least. I staggered back to my hotel room. In a daze that I can't even begin to describe I went to work. I hung a "do not disturb" sign on my door. I didn't answer the phone for a week. I told everyone, including you, that I was going out of town. I worked night and day. I didn't sleep. I hardly ate, but when I did I ordered my meals from room service, and by the end of the week I had written the entire play from start to finish. Page after page it poured from me. And when I was done I realized that it was the purest piece of work that I have ever had the pleasure of putting on paper." Stopping my story to stare in amazement up at the blue sky there must have been a bona-fide look of jubilation on my face, because when I turned to Lascivious he apparently presumed (by the expression on his face) that I was feeling proud of myself for having written the play, so shaking my head in protest I said, "No, no, it was a gift from the Great Beyond."

BOOK TWO

A View of the Virgin Birth Backstage

"I must say, John, that's an amazing story," Lascivious coolly comments with still enough skepticism that I can tell he is not completely convinced the bolt of lightening came from the Great Beyond. And a moment ago he was myopic enough to suggest that perhaps it was a fluke from mother nature and nothing more.

"Well, even more mind-boggling and amazing is how quickly I was able to find financial backing," I tell him. Then turning away from Lascivious's probing eyes to look at some pigeons in the park I remember how having finished the play on a Friday afternoon the phone rang in my hotel room. It was a producer who had somehow heard that I had just finished writing a Broadway play. "Only five minutes ago," I can remember saying into the receiver. I can also remember how baffled I was by the phone call. I do not know how he knew. I had not told anyone what I was working on. Not even the maid could have seen my notes, because I never left the room. Regardless, he said he was extremely interested and he asked me to send it over and then as a second thought he decided to have a messenger come to my hotel to pick it up in person. A few weeks later, during the cast member auditions, I asked him how he had known. I remember him shaking his head and saying, "It's the strangest thing. I found a memo on my desk with your name and number on it along with the title of the play, but when I asked my secretary about the memo she had no idea where it came from. I just knew, however, that I had a hit on my hands. Don't ask me to explain." I didn't. I was just thankful for my good fortune. Having faced the frightening fact that there are probably five million or more potential playwrights in this country alone my prospects of being produced, prior to that improbable phone call, appeared minuscule. I figured it was inevitable that I would be the recipient of I don't know how many rejections on I don't know how many other plays I would probably have to pen before I would finally get one produced. And even then I envisioned having to face failure after failure, flop after flop, fiasco after fiasco. Beginning on Off Broadway with bombs bigger than any the I.R.A. ever built.

Looking back at Lascivious I realize there is not much more that I can say to convince him. It is quite obvious he has to come to his own conclusion about the matter of my mishap with mother nature on the one hand, or my gift from God on the other. "It's just so hard to believe that God was behind it," Lascivious says, as though he had been reading my mind at that very moment.

"If it wasn't an act of God I don't know what it was? I have never wanted to be a playwright. Anyone who knows me can tell you it has never been my dream to be a dramatist and strangely enough it still isn't. I am not at all stagestruck. All those last minute rewrites and rehearsals and indecisive directors and penny pinching producers and temperamental stage stars. And there's really not a lot of money to be made unless you're lucky like a silver dollar or talented like a Tennessee Williams."

"You truly believe that God was behind it?" Lascivious asks.

"Wholeheartedly. Who else could it have been?"

"I must say it does sound like some kind of miracle?" Lascivious says at last; and then the

actor playing the part of Lascivious in the play catapults me back to my present predicament - opening night panic!

"It was a miracle," I say in retrospect to the Lascivious now in Los Angeles and in response to the Lascivious standing in front of me, for it is the latter one who asks me how was I able to write such a religiously powerful play?

It was a miracle in more ways than one, because until recently I had never read the Bible, had never been to church, and I have never considered myself a Christian. It is not until several months after the terrifying turmoil of opening night and all the upheaval brought about by that unenchanted evening that I buy myself a Bible. Looking back upon the play I wish in retrospect that I had read the Bible before that painful period of my life began, but how is a narcissistic novelist to know? Now, almost a year since opening night, I know, as I try to live through the wake of that nightmare, that I am in desperate need of answers to all the events that happened on opening night and in it's immediate aftermath. Furthermore, on top of everything else I am lonely for Lascivious. He is still in Los Angeles. Every time we talk on the telephone he tells me that I should visit him in California, but so far I have not been able to pry myself away from the play. Having seen every single performance each night I notice something different. Namely no two audiences are ever the same. Shortcomings in the structure or the plot of the play itself. Mistakes the actors make, no matter how subtle, are something I never miss. The slightest alteration of an actors voice from night to night is another thing I am inclined to notice. The strong or the weak points of each performance always get my attention, while improvisation made by any member of the cast is the best way to get my disapproval. Lately, instead of standing backstage, I have started to sit with the audience. Sometimes you can find me in the front row. Sometimes way in the back or up in the balcony. Sitting in the center of the auditorium on one occasion I felt that I would receive the full effect of the audience's reaction, until I realized that I prefer not to have so many people surrounding me on all sides. Ever since the rampage that took place on opening night I find I have a phobia about being in the midst of a mob. Wherever I am seated I say a small prayer prior to each performance, but so far nothing more has happened. At least nothing as horrendous as the carnage of opening night. "Amen," I always whisper to myself after the last curtain call when all is quiet except for the clapping of the audience.

"Just come out to the coast for a week," Lascivious suggests.

"I don't like Los Angeles," I reply coolly, for I have not forgiven him.

"Have you ever been?"

"Once, and I would go again, but to tell you the truth I'm not looking for any type of long term relationship, either," I tell him over the telephone. Tit for tat I am trying to be twice as torturous, in lieu of the letter he left for me on opening night. And though just recently I read in the Bible all about the benefits of turning the other cheek Lascivious is not the first one to witness the wisdom of those words did not sink into my subconscious like they should have. Well, no wonder, I think to myself, I was too worried about all the horrible things that had happened on opening night, which is why I went to buy a Bible to begin with. All the way back from the book store on Columbus Avenue I am so anxious to begin reading I start to run. The first thing I do when I enter into my hotel room, after catching my breath, is eagerly open up the New International Version of the Holy Bible. I start to read at random in both the Old and the New Testament. I am taken aback by the beauty of the verse and by some of the brilliant observations made throughout the Book. More than once I am awestruck and swayed by the

scripture, but at the same time I am baffled by much of what is written particularly the part in the Old Testament where it says, "Do not lie with a man as one lies with a woman; that is detestable." There are many more things throughout the Book that make me wonder about the degree of prejudice in the prophets who wrote it, but I am delighted when I notice that in the New Testament nearly every word that fell so freely from the mouth of Jesus Christ was a parable about the importance of Love. That same evening I am sitting in an armchair with the Bible laid open upon my lap. Sipping some tea that I ordered from room service I am reading Revelations when I suddenly remember the fabulous feeling that filled me the first time I saw one of the Rocky Mountains. I was twenty years old at the time and I was travelling by train in the summer across the country all the way to the west coast as it were. I had in my possession what they call a "sleeper car," which was extremely expensive compared to coach. Yet, I was more than able to pay for my passage with money that I made as a prostitute. Now, no sooner did I awaken early one morning in the comfort of my private compartment when I opened the blind on my window and there before me was the most magnificent sight I had ever seen in my twenty years of life spent solely in the city of New York. It was a mountain that seemed to me to be as high as heaven itself and the train was travelling lazily alongside it. Immediately I was overwhelmed by an exhilarating revelation that "God exists," but at the time I was so wound up in my world, worried about where I was going, and what I was going to do when I got there, that I said to myself, and I said it quite coldly, "So what?"

Lying to Lascivious about not liking Los Angeles was a falsehood as farfetched as some of the stories I write, for at the time of my trip to L.A. I was in the process of writing my first novel, and therefore I shall always remember it fondly. Nonetheless, the novel was a failure, in so far as the publishing industry is concerned, but to this day I believe that not only is it my best book, it was a catharsis to my coming completely out of the closet. So far it is also my personal favorite, perhaps because it was my firstborn, or possibly because no one would publish it I have had to give it it's own special place in my heart. It is, in fact, a severely long "gay" novel about discrimination and about the ruthless rise of a hot headed militant homosexual in Hollywood. One agent, here in New York City, who's interest was apparently peaked enough to read all six hundred manuscript pages, had the following catastrophic comment: "There is no market for such a lengthy book about homosexual love least of all from a nameless unpublished author." Since he was the last in a long line of professional people to tell me precisely the same thing I set the book aside reluctantly and tried my best to forget about all the time it took for me to write it. I did so by going to work on another novel and I readily confess to having a considerable amount of revenge in mind when doing so. Channelling my anger into a work of art, so came the second book, stupendous sales, certified success, a royalty check, and another form of prostitution. Now, instead of prostituting my person, I am prostituting words - words that flow freely and effortlessly from my pen very much the way molten lava spills from a mountain top. And as for the fate of my first book it is still sitting on a shelf. It is far less reluctant to leave and live life on it's own, though, now that it's single parent is no longer nameless, but renowned throughout the publishing world. I will make sure that it receives all the support it needs to thrive as an individual entity. Soon, it is safe to say, I will dust it off and send it out along with strict orders that it be published and put on a store shelf so that the public at least has the option to buy it, or burn it, or politely pass it by.

"It will ruin your career," my agent claims.

"It is my career," I say to him and to anyone else who is blinded by bigotry or a bad case of

homophobia.

But, getting back to this book and to the worldwide importance of opening night I think that I am quite possibly more nervous than the actors waiting to go onstage. They are all professional theater people who are accustomed to the curtain going up, to the glare of the lights, to the criticism of the crowd, and to the fear of forgetting an all too important line. This being my first play I must admit that I am a bit overwhelmed by all the hoopla about my being "the new boy on the block." Even though it is my name attached to the title, more often than not, I feel like a bystander backstage with little more than my already risque reputation riding on a review in the New York Times. Yet, if I had known, however improbable, what was about to transpire I truly would have thrown myself at the mercy of the New York Times. I suppose that is why life never lets us in on it's little surprises beforehand, but like Lascivious so often says, "Hardships endured, however horrific, have a way of making us stronger."

"I am as strong as I have to be," I say to a couple of stagehands, who have asked for my help in lifting a heavy partition and placing it out of the way.

"You've got a little bit of dirt on your tuxedo," one of them tells me after the task is done.

"It's only dust," I am pleased to reply, as I bend over to brush it off. "Do either of you have a light?" I ask upon returning to an upright position. "I ran out of matches."

The stagehand, who warned me earlier in the evening that "after the curtain rises acts of unprecedented evil will follow," takes a book of matches out of his shirt pocket. "Here, keep them," he says with a voice that is both compassionate and kind.

"Thank you," I say, and then I see they are from the nightclub where me and Lascivious met, but when I look up from lighting my cigarette to ask the stagehand if he goes to that bar... He is gone, so I go back to my designated spot behind the curtain where I can spy on the audience without being seen. Here, I am also able to watch what goes on backstage without being in anyone's way.

When my cigarette is finished I find myself still waiting impatiently in the wings on opening night for the play to start when the actor playing the part of Semen struts his muscular body to within a foot of where I am standing. He is considered to be a "stud" by several people. The director calls him a "doll." Myself, I think he more conceited than anything else, and when he wants to change one of his lines I laugh.

"It's only moments away from curtain time," I tell him. "Talk to me about it tomorrow." He walks away outraged at my refusal to indulge yet another one of his whims. Then seconds before a series of strange events start to unfold before my very eyes I spot the leading lady standing in the wing on the opposite side of the stage. She is wearing her costume and she looks appropriately ravaged. Her wet hair has been matted to the side of her face by the make-up person and there is red dye on her nightgown splashed on by one of the prop people. She is supposed to have just given birth to the Baby Jesus. As an actress of the highest caliber she is playing the part of Ovary, Semen's wife, but more importantly as I have said the Mother of the Messiah. She is older than what the character Ovary is supposed to be. The leading lady is perhaps twenty six or twenty seven, but who is to say for sure, certainly not her or her publicity agent. After studying her craft for quite some time at the Lee Strasberg school she then went on to become one of Broadway's best. She winks at me across the stage. I am not surprised, since she is notorious for winking at everyone with a vengeance. "Break a leg," I mouth, for at the time I have no idea that she is on the verge of doing just that. I am in the process of lighting yet another cigarette when one of the overhead lights breaks free. I happen to be looking up at the

time, for I have a habit of blowing my smoke towards the ceiling, so as not to offend some of the numerous nonsmokers; and when the loosened light lands on the leading lady my jaw drops and a mouthful of smoke escapes. The light itself is not that heavy and alone it would not have harmed her to severely. If the falling light had been her only foe she might have walked away with nothing more than a scratch or a bruise. But alas the light was not her only adversary, because with shock filled eyes and a gaping mouth I watch her lose her balance. Like a ballerina teetering on the edge of a stage she stumbles backwards and woebegone she does a swan dive down the stairs that lead to the basement, where I am sorry to say she subsequently breaks one of her lovely legs. The shinbone below the knee in her left leg breaks through the skin and is sticking out at an eighty degree angle. Knocked unconscious as well it becomes apparent by the time we reach her that she could have been killed. Crumpled like a rag doll and limp like over cooked spaghetti she is lying on the cement floor with her leg twisted into the position of a pretzel. "So much for the curtain going up on time," a stagehand is unsympathetic enough to say.

"Where's her understudy?" the director shouts up the stairs in a state of sheer panic.

Another one of the stagehands, in reference to the red dye on her nightgown, and in ignorance of my English teacher who told me to avoid using the word "badly," says, "She's bleeding badly."

"That's theater blood," I inform him, though I say nothing about his bad grammar. I for one can not look at her leg any longer. Feeling faint I turn to leave when I see the actors, who are playing the part of the angels "Testosterone" and "Estrogen" in the play. They are standing together at the top of the stairs and even from a distance it is not difficult to tell they are identical twins. They too have their mouths open wide, as they stare down in disbelief at the leading lady's lopsided leg. I am not being prejudiced when I say they are two of the most beautiful people on the planet. There is something very ethereal about them, but these acting angels, however ethereal looking, are no match for the innate beauty possessed by the two real angels I saw that day in Central Park. As opposed to trained theatrical actors Testosterone and Estrogen are professional models from an agency. The producer and the director both felt that for the part of the angels appearances were of primary importance. "I want them to be absolutely gorgeous," were the directors exact words. "I'll hire the two most breathtakingly beautiful people New York City has to offer."

"I saw her go into the lavatory," the actor playing the part of Testosterone tells the director from the top of the stairs where he is still standing beside his twin sister, who innocently came to audition with her brother and was cast on the spot for the part of Estrogen.

"Somebody call an ambulance," I say, with one last look at the leading lady. What a way to spend Christmas I think to myself as I walk away. She will be in traction for weeks, on crutches thereafter, and unable to work until well into the new year.

"I should have know then, Lascivious, that something was dreadfully wrong. But I didn't and it went from bad to worse as the play progressed. The chaos had barely begun when the leading lady broken her leg. It was merely the beginning of the end."

It would seem that the understudy, hired to fill in for the leading lady, was destined to play the part of Ovary, Mother to the Messiah. Her name is not important, in so far as the story goes, and furthermore, she wishes to remain anonymous. I am sure the fact that she gave birth to a baby onstage (a miraculous virgin birth) is by far more interesting and relevant to any reader. From now on for the sake of simplicity, however, I will refer to the understudy as Ovary, the

character she portrayed onstage for one unforgettable performance, so unforgettable in fact that everyone there will always remember the evening as "the night that Ovary the understudy gave birth to the Baby Jesus." Just as the world will never forget that Jesus Christ came back on Christmas Day in the year 1999 on opening night of a play entitled: CHRIST: THE SEQUEL.

Now apparently Ovary had studied Shakespeare in the drama department of Yale University and according to her portfolio after graduation she moved to Manhattan to pursue her childhood dream of becoming a theatrical actress. Although her career had not gotten off to a great start she did land several Off Broadway bit parts before taking the job of understudy for the leading lady. It was not Lady Macbeth to be sure, but it was work On Broadway and like many artists struggling for success she desperately needed the money. Furthermore, in a few months she would have another mouth to feed, so a regular paycheck was a blessing.

In reality, however, she did not graduate from school. Her portfolio was, in fact, filled with altered truths. She got pregnant at Yale and dropped out after only her second semester. She would have stayed in school except for her inability to deal with the nasty rumors running around the campus, which were started indiscriminately by several self-serving students. On the night of a school dance in the dark deserted dormitory was the time and place that Ovary claimed she was raped by an "invisible" man or being. One half of her classmates were convinced she was a virgin and was telling the truth, while the other half were certain she was a whore and was undoubtedly lying through her teeth. "If you had opened your eyes Ovary you would have seen that it was me," was the joke that escaped from the mouth of just about every jock on campus. Suffice to say, and setting aside the two theories of her insemination, she was not showing when the director hired her and by the time her abdomen did start to protrude with the fruit of her mysterious pregnancy everyone involved figured it would be fine, for after all the part of Ovary was the role of a pregnant women, so we all said, "Who better to play the part?" Even at the time there seemed to be something almost prophetic about the understudy's pregnancy, and unlike the leading lady who had been playing the part up until her unfortunate fall no pillows from the prop pile would be needed, like there had been during the days of the dress rehearsals. Then of course there was a rewrite done and as it turned out the delivery of the Baby Jesus was to take place entirely behind a closed bedroom door. The director demanded that I make the drastic change. "I can not show the bloody birth of a baby onstage," he said, and in a way he was right. The stage, unlike film, is not the forte for special effects. And as avant- garde as I would like to believe the play is I knew I was already pushing some highly sensitive buttons to the very limit. It was quite enough to have people calling it "theater of cruelty." A term whose definition I had to get out my dictionary to decipher, and in doing so I was thus informed of the following meaning: "a form of surrealist theater that emphasizes the cruelty of human existence."

Sadly enough it never occurred to any of us that the understudy would actually have to go onstage opening night. How could it? No one knew that light was going to land on the leading lady like it did. Certainly no one knew that Ovary, the understudy, the Mother of the Messiah, would actually end up giving birth to her baby onstage without the use of any special effects or even a pair of forceps.

Five minutes before the curtain is scheduled to go up everyone is frantic, but not nearly as frantic as we are five minutes after the play begins. Waiting as we are for those house lights to go down we are wondering how in God's name are we going to hide the fact that after she has the baby in the first act she will still be pregnant in the second and the third act?

"She is the only one who knows the part and has memorized the lines," I say in desperation to the director.

"Well, if necessary we'll have her wear a potato sack or a pair of drapes all during the second and the third act. Get the wardrobe lady to find her an outfit," says the distressed director.

"Esther, can you find something that will cover her stomach?" I ask.

"What's the matter with what I'm wearing?" Ovary unwittingly wonders aloud, and understandably so, since she is surrounded by a swarm of people all in a panicked state.

The director snaps at her impatiently. "You look like a barrel, and besides you can't be seen in the same clothes for the duration of the play, now can you?"

"For heaven's sake. She's nine months pregnant. It doesn't matter what she wears. The audience will know," I cry, as I succumb to the seed sown into my subconscious (by a pair of disparaging parents) at a very early age that sprouts pessimism all over the place. The play will be a flop. A fiasco. A failure. Then all of a sudden it is show time and Ovary is ushered onstage and into the bedroom where perhaps the most painful part of her story begins. I am relieved to find that my fears are unfounded, for she has her baby during the first act and her stomach is as flat as a pancake for the rest of the play. Granted it takes her a little longer to reach her marks. It takes a tremendous amount of time and endurance for her to walk from stage left to stage right, so the play runs twenty five minutes longer than it did during rehearsals, but the understudy's sore derriere is not the only reason for the delay. The devil himself has a great deal to do with it, as you will soon see for yourselves.

The tragic turn of events that follow, not long after the baby is born, are something that even I have trouble believing. Though I suppose I shouldn't since I was just one of the hundreds of horrified observers fortunate enough to have survived. As living witnesses of the evening we like to call ourselves, "the lucky ones."

After Ovary, the understudy, the Mother of the Messiah, has actually given birth in the bedroom (unbeknown as it were at the time to the rest of the cast onstage) everything in the play went haywire. The actors were no longer acting they were following a sequence of events that strangely coincided with the script. I should mention as well, for the sake of authenticity, that Ovary's screams which were supposed to be make-believe in accordance with the plot of the play were as real as the blood on the baby she bore.

"It wasn't art imitating life," I tell Lascivious, "it was life imitating art."

"You mean, Ovary, the understudy, had her baby onstage during a live performance on opening night?" Lascivious asks me during a long distance phone call from Los Angeles and long after the fact.

"She wasn't pretending, Lascivious. She went into labor right on cue."

"How is she?"

"I'm not sure. Considering everything else that happened on opening night she's probably recovering in some sanatorium."

"So what you're saying is in the second act when she makes her appearance in front of the audience she has really just given birth?"

"That's right," I say into the receiver. "She insisted she could go through with the play. She pushed the placenta aside and said, 'The show must go on.' I heard her myself when she stood up and jokingly said, 'Who better to play the part of a woman who's just had a baby than a woman who's just had a baby?'"

"Wow, what a trooper. And talk about realism in the theater."

"Tell me about it. The audience thought she was spellbinding. They thought she was giving the greatest theatrical performance since Sarah Bernhardt stepped off the stage. I saw several people look at their programs to find out who the talented newcomer was, but of course her name was not on the credits, because she was called upon at the last minute."

"Well, if she wins a Tony award for her outstanding performance, no one can say she doesn't deserve it," Lascivious says.

I have to force myself to smile, even though the thought of Ovary, or anyone else, winning an award for what happened on opening night is quite hilarious. "But wait, Lascivious, that's not the worst of it," I tell him over the telephone - a contraption that lately I loathe talking into for any length of time. The sound of his voice, seemingly so near, makes me believe we are side by side when in reality we are two thousand miles apart.

"There's more?" he asks me.

"Much more, and much worse. It was the worse night of my entire life and as you know I've had hordes of those."

"What else happened?"

"I'll tell you when you get back to New York. When are you coming? I ask as casually as I can, because I already know he is coming back...

"Tomorrow."

"I can't wait to see you. I'll meet you at the airport. What time is your flight?" He tells me the time and shortly afterwards I hang up; having known before I even answered the phone that it was him and that he was phoning to inform me that he was coming back to New York tomorrow. Esther, the fortuneteller, told me.

All through the long night my hotel room feels like the waiting room in a hospital ward, or some other place where I do not want to be. I am so impatient to see Lascivious the following day that I am presently unable to sleep. I consider going out on the town just to pass the time, but it is too late, so I saunter over to the window instead to stare at the skyline. From where I am standing and from the direction I am facing I can see Carnegie Hall and the outskirts of Central Park. Lighting a cigarette I lay back down on my bed and think about all the grooming I will undoubtedly do in the morning to get ready for my romantic reunion with Lascivious. I will start with the long overdue clipping of my toenails, and I will scrap the callouses on the soles of my feet. I will trim my nose hairs and I will shave off the fringe of fine hair on the nape of my neck. I remind myself before finally falling asleep that I must not forget to pluck between my eyebrows; and by the time I have finished shaving my face the following day it is time to leave for the lunch date I have with my publisher. Eager to hear all about the book I am now in the process of writing he agrees to pick up the tab.

"It's about the Second Coming of Christ," I tell him while stabbing a large red radish with my fork.

"Is it fiction?" he asks.

"No, it's a factual expose about everything that happened on the opening night of my play."

"When will you be done?" he inquires anxiously.

"Very soon, I just have a few more loose ends to tie up," I tell him, as I sip on some mineral water, which was imported from the French Alps.

It is late in the afternoon when I leave for Kennedy airport. I arrive an hour early, so I find myself whiling away the time in one of the cocktail lounges. The plane is right on time and Lascivious lands safely. We meet in the waiting area just outside the baggage terminal. He is

unchanged since I saw him last. His hair is a little longer and he has a suntan, which makes me admire him all the more, but everything else about him is exactly as I remember. After telling each other how good it is to be together again we take a taxi straight to the theater. Twice I tell the driver to step on it. "We've only got forty five minutes before curtain time," I complain to Lascivious.

"I've missed you," Lascivious says to me with his warm blue eyes gazing intently upon my perfectly groomed person.

"I've missed you too. I wish you had never left, and I'll never understand why you did."

"I needed to get away. We were getting so serious, but now I know I want to be with you and nobody else. I love you, John."

I do not answer him right away, because I do not know what to say. I am afraid if I tell him how I feel I will frighten him away. "I love you more than life itself and I can not live without you any longer," are the words I want to say, but my pride or perhaps my inability to turn the other cheek prevents me from expressing myself. "I'm glad you're back in New York, " I tell him, for it seems like the safest thing to say. Then to safeguard myself to an even greater extent I change the subject by announcing, "You returned just in time. Tonight is the last night the play is showing. They're banning it."

"Why?" he wants to know and he seems to be as outraged as I was when I first heard the news.

"Too many people are upset over everything that happened on opening night and I can't say as I blame them."

"By the way, where are we going?"

"To the theater," I tell him.

"I thought it was in the other direction?"

"It was, but not anymore. Not after opening night. The play is now playing at a theater on Broadway right by Shubert Alley."

"Then it's true?"

"You mean about the theater burning down last year between Christmas and New Years? You had better believe it's true. Half a city block burned. And if you ask me it was the wrath of God." All too clearly I can remember the mysterious way that cloud hovered over the theater on opening night and then after the theater burned down it phenomenally followed the play. It moved methodically up the street for several city blocks in pursuit of the play, as though at the center of it's darkness there was a mind with a will of it's own.

"And what is all this nonsense I've been reading in the tabloids about the Second Coming of Christ?" Lascivious asks me with a worried look and a raised eyebrow.

Shaking my head helplessly, I reply, "It's not nonsense. It's the God honest truth. The Messiah was born onstage."

"You must be joking? It's all a publicity hoax, right?"

"I wish it were. I wish it were. They have prove," I tell him just as the taxi comes to a screeching stop; dropping us off directly in front of the theater we are thrown into a throng of people passionately protesting the play.

"What kind of prove?" Lascivious wants to know now, as we fight out way through the crowd.

"I'll tell you later."

"Tell me now," Lascivious says.

"Wait, the curtain's about to go up," I whisper and I am completely unaware that in many ways the very worst is yet to come. And since life never lets us in on it's horrific little surprises beforehand I suppose for the time being I shall have to remain in the dark.

"I want to know now," Lascivious demands squirming in his seat in the front row.

"Be quiet."

"The play has been playing now for exactly one year. You wrote the damn thing and you've seen all 365 performances. You know each line by heart, so tell me what else happened on opening night?"

I crack my knuckles silently to relieve the tension building up inside of me, and as badly written as the following phrase may be I am obliged to feel like a balloon that is about to burst. Lascivious, sensing my fragile state of mind, takes my hand and holds it. I squeeze his hand with all my strength, as once again the curtain rises to reveal what a stagehand once referred to as "acts of unprecedented evil." Recently I've realized that in a roundabout way he was right, for everything I wrote really happened. Everything and more. Tilting my head back and rolling my eyes I shiver involuntarily, for on the other side of the circular cement ceiling is that dark ominous cloud looming over the heads of everyone in the theater. "How does it manage to stay in the same spot for so long?" Scientists from all across the country, who have come to investigate it's supernatural presence, ask themselves, but so far no one has come up with an answer even close to the truth or for that matter any kind of feasible explanation. I am not surprised, since science is akin to guesswork when it comes to the Great Beyond. Squeezing Lascivious's hand even harder, I glance at the program he is holding in his other hand. His eyes follow mine and he is puzzled by the names of the actors printed on the pamphlet. "This is an entirely new cast? What happened to the other actors?"

"Didn't I tell you? Don't you read the newspapers? Most of them died on opening night?"

"How?"

Looking at Lascivious, as the house lights go down for the last time, I can hear myself say, "I will tell you later. It will make more sense after you watch the play."

CHRIST: THE SEQUEL THE CAST LASCIVIOUS SEMEN OVARY EMBRYO TESTOSTERONE ESTROGEN JOHN THE BABY JESUS

ACT ONE

[The opening scene is set at night in New York City in a dilapidated apartment building located on the northern perimeter of Central Park. Two apartments can be seen onstage that are separated by a dividing wall, which runs directly down the center of the stage. Imaginary living room windows exist only in the imaginations of the actors. Throughout the play they will pretend to look out these windows (at the front of the stage) into the park, but in reality they are looking into the audience. There is a line drawn on the floor at the front of the stage which the

actors never cross whenever they go to look out the make-believe windows. The layout of the apartments are identical: a kitchen, a bedroom, and a bathroom are positioned in the same place in both apartments. The most noticeable difference, other than the furniture, is a big artificial Christmas tree that stands in one corner of LASCIVIOUS'S apartment, which is spotlessly clean compared to the cluttered apartment next door. The Christmas tree is decorated with colorful lights, ornaments, candy canes, and on top there is a silver star.]

[When the curtain goes up LASCIVIOUS is standing just off stage. He is a large man with long blond hair that falls several inches past his shoulders. Twenty eight or twenty nine years of age he is well built and rather rugged looking. He is wearing a conservative three piece suit, a neck tie, prescription glasses, and his long blond hair is pulled back neatly into a pony tail. Flashes of lightening can been seen through the kitchen windows of both apartments. It illuminates the rooms with an occasional, yet consistent, eerie glow. Inside LASCIVIOUS'S apartment, which incidentally is dimly lit stage right, a woman is giving birth to a baby in the bedroom. The door is closed. Her screams, however, can be heard by the audience intermittent with the raging thunderstorm sounding in the background. The doctor who is helping deliver the child can also be heard telling her repeatedly to "Push." Simultaneously, LASCIVIOUS begins his narration.]

LASCIVIOUS

"All the world's a stage,
And all men and women merely players;
They have their exits and their entrances
And one man in his time plays many parts,..."

As we all know those are the immortal words of William Shakespeare. What we do not know is how our story began. Did it begin with a man and a woman? Did it begin with the beginning of time? Or did it begin when in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth? An ejaculation of semen has sent 500 million sperm into the womb of the woman in question. [He points to the closed bedroom door.] The womb, which is symbolic of all things. The womb, in which this story began. With sperm swimming frantically towards the ova that was waiting in her Fallopian tube the race was on. Inevitably there was only one winner, which penetrated the ova to begin a new and illustrious life. Now, according to the DNA pattern of this particular God send the winner is a boy. His genetic code can tell us that physically his eyes will be blue and his hair will be curly and black. He will stand six feet in height, should he reach maturity, but unfortunately the DNA pattern will not reveal for us the infant's fate. For nine months now this baby has been safe inside the circular walls of it's mother's womb, waiting to be born, and any minute now it will be. Nine months, however, is not long compared to two thousand years, which is how long Christians have been waiting for him to come, again. Well, wait no more mankind for the Messiah. Our Savior is on his way.

[LASCIVIOUS strips off his suit, tie, glasses, socks, shirt, and underwear. Then to get further into the part he is about to play he releases his hair from it's pony tail. He leaves his clothing in a pile on the edge of the stage. Naked, he turns around and enters his apartment. In his living room he puts on a faded pair of blue jeans and a black baseball cap with the initials S.F. on the front. He places the cap on his head backwards. He remains shirtless throughout the first act. Almost immediately there is a loud knock at the door, which he crosses the room to answer. JOHN enters soaking wet. He has short dark hair that is styled in the most recent mode.

He is smaller than LASCIVIOUS, shorter by several inches, and a year or two younger. He is wearing the latest and most fashionable outfit one can find in New York. Throughout the play he will always look like he has just come from a trendy nightclub and he is constantly concerned about his appearance. He displays this fault by fixing his hair continuously and by fussing over any crumples or creases in his clothing.]

JOHN [bursting into the room breathlessly] I came as fast as I could. I had a hard time finding a cab. The storm's getting worse, and I forgot to bring an umbrella. What's going on? On the phone you said some woman is having a baby?

LASCIVIOUS

She certainly is. She's in my bedroom. [He gives JOHN a towel and then he goes to the bar in the far corner of the room.] Do you want a drink?

JOHN

Scotch on the rocks. So who is she? Please don't tell me that you're the father and that you're a closet case heterosexual? [He crosses the room and kisses LASCIVIOUS on the mouth.]

LASCIVIOUS [laughing]

Don't worry. I don't have a heterosexual bone in my body. [He hands JOHN the drink. They both sit down. LASCIVIOUS on the sofa and JOHN in an armchair. They are facing each other, but LASCIVIOUS is looking towards the audience and JOHN has his back to the audience. The woman is still screaming out in pain. Occasionally the doctor emphatically tells her to "Push." The thunderstorm rages on.] I think she lives next door. I've seen her once before. I found her unconscious in the hallway in the throws of labor. She refused to go to the hospital, so I brought her in here and called my doctor. [He lowers his voice.] I think she's a junkie. I saw all kinds of needle marks on both of her arms.

JOHN

Maybe she's a diabetic?

LASCIVIOUS

In this neighborhood? I don't think so. Besides she looks strung out. Her eyes are glazed and she's underweight.

JOHN [outraged]

Then why in the world is she having a baby? It will probably be deformed. It will almost definitely be addicted. It could have brain damage or respiratory problems. It could be born dead, or it could be forced to suffer first and then die afterwards during a withdrawal seizure.

LASCIVIOUS

[shaking his head] It's beyond me why she's having it. As soon as the doctor saw her he said, "She's suffering from malnutrition," but he mentioned something about her being full term, which means the baby isn't going to be premature.

JOHN
It's beyond me why anybody would bring a baby into this world to begin with?

LASCIVIOUS
What a pessimistic thing to say. I never knew you were such a cynic.

JOHN
Would you want to bring a baby into this world? A world full of famine and disease and on the verge of environmental disaster. Not to mention nuclear warfare hanging over our heads, homelessness, and a nation dependent upon alcohol and drugs with a soaring crime rate.

LASCIVIOUS
I had no idea you were so morose. What if the baby grows up to be a leader who does good for the world?

JOHN [scoffingly]
Like John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Abraham Lincoln, Indira Gandhi and her son? The good ones get assassinated by the very people they are trying to help, while at the same time people allow leaders like Hitler into positions of power. Let's change the subject before I go in there and give that drug addicted bitch an abortion with my bare hands!

LASCIVIOUS [shocked]
What a horrible thing to say.

JOHN
What a horrible world we live in, and even worse is the fact that it's a world full of hypocrites who try to pass themselves off a heroes.

LASCIVIOUS
That may be, but I don't believe in abortion.

JOHN
You don't? You don't believe that women should have a choice and that no other man or women or government has the right to take that option away from them? Besides, it's better to allow an unfit mother to have an abortion than to let her raise a serial killer, a rapist, a terrorist, a banker, a dictator, a politician...

LASCIVIOUS
I get your point.

JOHN
A baby that's born addicted to drugs has an incredibly hard start in life. It could be born without any eyes, or ears, or legs, or arms, or none of the above.

LASCIVIOUS

True, but there's a chance the baby she's having can overcome it's handicaps whatever they might be. It could be the next Mother Theresa or maybe even the Messiah.

JOHN

Well, if you ask me the risk is too great and I may be a pessimist, but you're an eternal optimist. The Mother Theresa's of this world are one in a billion or more, and if the Messiah is ever nuts enough to come back for more abuse at the hands of the human race I doubt very much [laughing] he will be born in your bedroom.

LASCIVIOUS

You should have more faith in your fellow man and you're shaking from the cold. Why don't you come over here and sit beside me?

JOHN

That's the most sensible thing you've said since I got here. [He stands up and moves over to the sofa, so that now they are both facing the audience. The bedroom door is directly behind them. Having sat down he throws one arms across LASCIVIOUS'S shoulder and kisses him.] I've missed you. [They begin kissing each other with increasing passion, but a particularly painful sounding cry from the woman causes them to stop and take a drink.]

LASCIVIOUS

I missed you too. I thought you were going to come over last night?

JOHN

I had to work late. Then I had an audition for a commercial and by the time I got home I was too tired to make the trip across town. You know we could move in together? We could make a commitment. We could...

LASCIVIOUS [smiling]

We could get killed in separate car accidents at the same time too. What's your point? Never mind, I know what your point is. You want me to propose.

JOHN [scornful]

Don't flatter yourself. All I want is your penis in my mouth twenty four hours a day. [He stands up haughtily.] And I'd like to believe that when it's in my mouth it isn't saturated with somebody elses saliva?

LASCIVIOUS

Sit down, and stop being such a cynic. I swear you're the most suspicious person on the planet.

JOHN [smiling and sitting down] How long has she been in the bedroom?

LASCIVIOUS
I'm not sure, but it seems like she's been here for hours. I tried to call you earlier, but there was no answer. I left a message on your machine. I figured you were probably preoccupied and weren't picking up?

JOHN
Now who's being suspicious? I was at my acting class, silly. Besides I'm not the one who's intent on seeing other people. Unlike you, my penis is not pointed in that direction.

LASCIVIOUS [mockingly]
Sorry, I forgot you had school tonight. How's it going? Are you still learning how to become a method actor? [A loud cry and then a shrill scream from the woman behind the closed door is heard.]

JOHN
If you're talking about the Stanislavsky System, then the answer is yes.

LASCIVIOUS
Is that when you try to get inside the inner life of the person you're portraying?

JOHN
Yeah, you try to experience the same emotions.

LASCIVIOUS
Well, I don't understand why you're auditioning for commercials when you're big ambition is to be in a Broadway play?

JOHN
Because I need the money. Because it looks good on my resume. Because it's possible exposure. Because, contrary to popular belief, Broadway producers aren't beating down my door.

LASCIVIOUS
How did the audition go?

JOHN
It went all right.

LASCIVIOUS
What was the commercial for?

JOHN
A breakfast cereal for dogs. [After saying this he is silent for a short while.]

LASCIVIOUS
So, did you get the part or not?

JOHN
They said I was the best "raisin in the sun" they had ever seen, but at the last minute the sponsors decided to hire a woman who doesn't have hairy legs to promote their bran filled breakfast cereal that tastes like cut up cupboard, which is why I called it dog food to their faces after they informed me I didn't get the part after all.

LASCIVIOUS [laughing]
You'll have better luck next time.

JOHN [shaking his head and smiling] Mr. Optimism himself.
[The woman in the bedroom lets out another very loud scream, as the doctor stretches the word "Puuussshhh," and the thunder and lightening increase.]

LASCIVIOUS
The storm is getting closer.

JOHN
Did you hear the way she screamed? It sounds like she's in agony. If I ever have to play a pregnant woman in labor in some crummy commercial at least I'll have something to draw on. I'll tell you, though, I'm glad I'm not a woman. I wouldn't be able to stand the pain, and besides I'd make a terrible parent.

LASCIVIOUS
What makes you say that?

JOHN
I like to travel too much and I like to listen to loud music too much and I don't like responsibility too much.

LASCIVIOUS
You're too hard on yourself. I think you'd make a terrific parent. You're the most patient person I know. How many years have you been waiting for your big break?

JOHN [smiling]
Very funny, but in the future don't forget that I'm the sarcastic wit and you're the recipient of my wisecracks.

LASCIVIOUS
I know. I just couldn't resist. And you're right you are witty, which is one of the reasons I like you. But seriously, you don't like kids? I'd have all kinds of them if I could. I grew up an only child.

JOHN

Kids are ok, but in reality they're nothing but little human beings, so no I don't like them, and it's got nothing to do with the fact that I have far too many brothers and sisters. I mean, do you like baby spiders better than you like big spiders? Just between you and me though, I'm really not as cold hearted as I sound. It's just that sometimes the human race scares the hell out of me. Enough baby talk. You still haven't told me about your visit to the doctor. How did it go? Did you get the results of your test?

LASCIVIOUS [He turns his head evasively to pretend that he is looking at something in the kitchen and then finally he answers with a feigned absentmindedness.] Ah, yes.

JOHN

Well, don't keep me in suspense. Was it positive or negative?

LASCIVIOUS

Negative, of course. [Standing and crossing the room he proceeds in pouring them both another drink. After a moment elapses he looks across the room and smiles at JOHN, who has his back to LASCIVIOUS and has become solemnly silent.]

JOHN [cheerful sounding]

That's great. Let's celebrate. Let's drink to our longevity. I don't know why you've been so worried lately? You practice safe sex.

LASCIVIOUS [returning from the bar with their drinks in hand] That's not the point. I could have contracted it long ago. Long before I met you and sometimes it takes that long to show up on a test.

JOHN

It's a frightening fact isn't it? Just the same I get tested once every six months, for that false sense of security I suppose. I've known so many people over the years who have died. It's such a dreadful disease. Do you think they will ever find a cure? It's 1999 and we're still no closer to finding even a vaccine. [He turns his head and stares at the Christmas tree in the corner.] In a few days it will be the year 2000 and God only knows how many people have already died from the virus.

LASCIVIOUS

I guess the government's got something more important to spend the taxpayers money on. [Jumping up suddenly he goes over to the Christmas tree and retrieves one of the boxes from underneath. Upon returning to the sofa he gives it to JOHN.] I almost forgot. Merry Christmas, John.

JOHN [Opening the gift slowly and self-consciously he unwraps a set of wind chimes. It is the first time since he came into the apartment that he has showed the slightest signs of being shy. Apparently he is the kind of person who feels awkward when giving or receiving a gift.]

They're beautiful. Thank you. I left home in such a hurry I forgot to bring yours.

LASCIVIOUS

You can give it to me tomorrow when I come over for dinner. And now I want to tell you something. First of all I just want to say that this has been the best year of my life and also I wanted to tell you, contrary to popular belief, there hasn't been anybody else since I met you.

JOHN [smiling]

I already know that. I guess I'm just insecure.

LASCIVIOUS

Mr. Insecure himself. By the way, are you still expecting your parents tomorrow?

JOHN

They'll be here with bells on. [He gives the chimes a shake.] Sometime in the afternoon I would imagine. They're driving down from Hartford. Mom will want to get an early start and dad will be dragging his butt like usual, but Mom will get her way. She always does.

LASCIVIOUS

Then you must take after your mom? I'm looking forward to meeting your folks.

JOHN

They'll like you. You're the only friend I have who's got a job. Everyone I hang out with is either a prostitute or a welfare recipient or both. Starving artists all of us. The only reason I'm working is because I happened to get offered a job that allows me to work inside a theater. Still, I resent having to work in this world at anything other than my craft or my calling. And sweeping up candy wrappers and cigarette butts in a rundown theater on Off Broadway is not what I was put on this earth to do, nor does it give me any kind of artistic freedom or sense of fulfillment. But, like my mom says, "You have to fight for artistic freedom." I suppose she's right. Nothing comes easy in this world. I just want to know why you have to make money in order to survive in society? I mean who started the system? Who's idea was it? A friend of mine who's a writer flatly refuses to work at anything other than his novels and it isn't because he's lazy or uneducated or can't get a job. He writes ten to twelve hours a day seven days a week. Once in a while he takes time off to rejuvenate, but other than that he is totally committed. He says he would rather cut off his head than be forced by a self- indulgent society to do something he doesn't want to do. He says writing is his only reason for living and the only talent he has. Yet, the same society that turned him into a writer and wants him to create for their consumption is not the least bit concerned if he has to starve or if he ever succeeds. The world is so unsupportive of the artist who is just starting out. I guess that's just how the world works, but I know how he feels. I mean why does a person have to make automobiles in a factory in order to buy food that is a gift from mother nature and why do you have to pay money for wood and stone to build yourself a home when the wood and the stone don't belong to anybody. We wouldn't be in such an industrialized mess if mankind learned how to share his surroundings, which don't belong to him to begin with. My father, who's a banker, thinks I'm a bum. He doesn't believe art is work. He's one of those types who believes a man's success is measured by how

much money he makes. "Dad," I say every time he brings up the subject, "I don't believe banking is anything but a bunch of bull." You'll see for yourself tomorrow.

LASCIVIOUS

I'm looking forward to it. I miss my parents the most around Christmas. It's been five years now since their car accident, but sometimes it feels like it was only yesterday.

JOHN

It must be awful to lose people you love that way. I've never been close to anyone who's died. I guess I'm lucky. And don't get me wrong I love my parents very much. I even respect my father for the hard work he does. I just don't believe that money should be the most important thing on the planet, and it is. I don't believe that people should have to suffer and die and go without for their lack of it, like they do. I've always said that when I make it big on Broadway and I have millions of dollars I'm going to give most of it away, and I will. I'll only keep enough to hold onto my artistic freedom. It's difficult to act on an empty stomach unless you're playing the part of someone who's starving, like any number of people right here in America according to what I heard on the news last night. But, I wonder, how much is ever enough? They say the more money you have the more money you think you need to survive. More is never enough. I suppose that's one reason why the rich keep on getting richer. They think they have to. I may be idealistic, but I just hope that I never forget how much is enough. Promise me when I'm rich and famous that you won't ever let me forget.

LASCIVIOUS

You won't forget. You're too much of a martyr. [sounding extremely sentimental] And now I want you to promise me something too. Every time you hear those chimes I want you to think of me.

JOHN [slightly sarcastic]

I will, whenever the wind blows through my apartment.

LASCIVIOUS

I'm serious.

JOHN [smiling]

So am I, you'd be surprised how often the wind blows through my apartment. By the way, what do you want to do on New Years Eve?

LASCIVIOUS

I don't know yet. I haven't given it much thought I've had so much on my mind. No doubt it will probably be a humdinger since it's the end of a millennium. We could go to Times Square like we did last year?

JOHN

I was hoping maybe we could spend a quiet romantic evening at home? Just the two of us together. I'll buy a big bottle of champagne and we can rent an old movie or listen to show tunes

or something.

LASCIVIOUS
Sure, that sounds great. [He stands up with a heavy sounding sigh and moves over to the make-believe window.] Come and look at the lightening in the park.

JOHN
Is it still raining?

LASCIVIOUS
It's so strange that we're having a thunderstorm this time of year? It should be snowing. Do you remember the blizzard we had last Christmas?

JOHN [still sitting on the sofa] It's the pollution. Global warming is changing the weather patterns all over the world and what do we do we just keep on putting all kinds of chemicals into the atmosphere so that we can continue on with our luxurious lifestyles. It's funny though, because at this rate we might, at the very most, be able to survive for another forty or fifty years before the ozone layer disappears altogether, as opposed to applying a little conscious effort to living in harmony with nature infinitely longer.

LASCIVIOUS
You're right, but rain is better than two feet of snow.

JOHN [He gets up and goes over to the window to stand next to LASCIVIOUS, who is still staring forlornly into the park.] Your breath is steaming up the window. [He himself breathes on the window purposefully and then he writes on the imaginary pane of glass with his forefinger, while at the same time speaking out loud the words which he is writing.] I HAVE HOPE.

LASCIVIOUS [Raising his arm he also writes on the window. The first two words he says in unison to writing them, while the last word he waits to say out loud until after he has finished writing it.] I HAVE [pause] AIDS. [With a frightened look in his eyes he turns his head sideways to look at his lover.]

JOHN [He is stunned and unable to speak, so he writes on the window once more without ever opening his mouth.] I LOVE YOU.

LASCIVIOUS
I love you, too.
[The loudest scream yet escapes from the woman giving birth. Both men are startled. They turn around abruptly and look at the bedroom door.]

JOHN [Staring in exasperation at the wall that separates the two apartments.] Jesus Christ, isn't there anybody home next door? [Just as he speaks a flash of lightening lights up the darkened apartment stage left.]

LASCIVIOUS [frustrated and shaking his head] I knocked before you came, but there was no answer. The walls are as thin as a piece of paper and I haven't heard anyone coming or going. I asked the woman if there was someone that I could call and she just mumbled something about her "brother embryo." Whatever that means? I tried to ask her about the father, but all she said was something about "semen." [He shrugs his shoulders, as a series of very loud shrill screams from the woman cause the men to put aside all their cares and empathize completely with her pain. A few loud cracks of thunder are followed by lightening, the sound of a slap, and the welcoming cry of a baby. LASCIVIOUS looks at JOHN with wide wondrous eyes that are full of both hope and despair. The two men smile at each other. They listen for more sounds from within the bedroom, but everything is silent, so LASCIVIOUS crosses the room resolutely and knocks on the door, which the doctor opens right away.]

[The doctor enters the living room leaving the bedroom door open. The figure of the woman can been seen by the audience lying on the bed. In his early forties the doctor appears to be full of fatigue. "It's a boy," he says wiping his brow and then he exits taking his black bag with him as he leaves.]

LASCIVIOUS [After seeing the doctor out LASCIVIOUS goes into the bedroom. He returns a moment later with a delightful grin on his face, and quietly closes the door.] They're both sleeping.

JOHN
Did you see the baby?

LASCIVIOUS
He's wrapped in a blanket, but he seems to be well enough and the doctor didn't say anything, so I guess he must be all right. This calls for another drink. [He goes to the bar. He brings the bottle back with him and he sits down beside JOHN on the sofa.]

JOHN [He waits for LASCIVIOUS to finish pouring their drinks.]
So the baby doesn't look deformed?

LASCIVIOUS
Not as far as I could tell. He's all wrinkled and red, but I think that's natural. Besides the doctor would have said something if there was anything the matter.

JOHN
I wonder why he left so quickly?

LASCIVIOUS
The doctor? He had to get back to the hospital.

JOHN
[raising his glass] A toast, to the woman in the bedroom who has given birth.

LASCIVIOUS [bitterly]
[raising his glass] And to the God in heaven who has given me death. [He tilts his head back and empties the glass in one gulp. He immediately pours himself another. Then he bangs the bottle down on the table.]

JOHN [worried]
Now, who's being morose?

LASCIVIOUS
I am, and why shouldn't I be?

JOHN
Don't be angry at God. God didn't have anything to do with it. AIDS is a virus here on earth not in heaven, and contrary to what too many prejudiced people believe it wasn't put here by God as a form of punishment. It kills indiscriminately, like the bubonic plague, or like a bus with no brakes barreling through a busy intersection.

LASCIVIOUS
You're right. I'm just feeling sorry for myself. I never thought it would happen to me. And you don't seem very surprised by the results of the test? Or by the fact that earlier I lied.

JOHN
I was shocked when you first told me, but to be perfectly honest I've known for quite some time.

LASCIVIOUS
How could you have known when I didn't?

JOHN
Well, let's just say I suspected something was wrong when you woke up last month in the middle of the night covered in sweat with the window wide open. And a couple of weeks ago when you cut yourself shaving it took a long time to heal.

LASCIVIOUS [nodding his head] It came as a surprise to me. When the doctor told me my test came back positive I was so stunned I could hardly find my way home. I finally had to take a cab.

JOHN
You should have called me, and you should have told me sooner. How did you think I was going to react? Did you think if I found out I'd leave you? I love you. It makes no difference to me.

LASCIVIOUS
Well, it makes a very big difference to me.

JOHN
That's not what I mean. I mean my feelings for you haven't gone away, and I'm not going to either.

LASCIVIOUS
Well, I will be going away, which reminds me at my funeral...

JOHN [angry]
Don't talk that way. Did you get any counselling at the clinic?

LASCIVIOUS
No, I left before they had a chance.

JOHN
Well, first of all you don't have full blown AIDS. And you can be HIV positive and live for a very long time.

LASCIVIOUS
I could also get sick tomorrow and never get well, so I would like to get this over with.

JOHN
Is this the reason you asked me to think of you whenever I hear those chimes?

LASCIVIOUS
When I heard them in the store they somehow reminded me of you, so I thought hey maybe one day when I'm gone they'll remind you of me.

JOHN
I think I'll have another drink.

LASCIVIOUS [He refills both of their glasses.] Now, first of all I want to be cremated. I can't stand the idea of rotting in the ground after I'm dead.

JOHN
Do we have to talk about this tonight?

LASCIVIOUS
Yes, and at my funeral I don't want anyone to cry. If they cry I want you to promise me you'll tell them to stop or ask them leave if necessary.

JOHN [incredulous]
How can I ask someone who is grieving because you're gone to leave your funeral?

LASCIVIOUS [laughing]

Just say that Lascivious didn't want you to cry and if they don't listen then whack them on the side of the head and tell them to stop feeling so sorry for themselves.

JOHN [puzzled]
I'm not going to whack someone in mourning on the side of the head, and I don't understand why you wouldn't want people crying at your funeral?

LASCIVIOUS
Because they're not crying for me they're crying for themselves. [He becomes quiet and introspective.] No matter what happens to a person after they're dead tears are of little use to them, and I have always hated funerals for their phoniness. In fact, I don't even want a funeral.

JOHN
What would you like me to do with your body?

LASCIVIOUS [with a sly grin]
A blow-job would be nice.

JOHN
I mean after you're dead.

LASCIVIOUS
The same.

JOHN [giggling]
That's disgusting.

LASCIVIOUS [starting to slur] Ok, you can have a funeral, but I want you to get drunk and have a good time.

JOHN
You are drunk, and you're not having a very good time.

LASCIVIOUS
I may be drunk, but I know what I'm talking about, so promise me, no matter what, no crying.

JOHN
I promise I won't cry. Now let's talk about something else. Does the baby look more like a serial killer or Mother Theresa?

LASCIVIOUS [laughing]
Well, if he looks like Mother Theresa he's going to have a tough time of it. It's a boy, remember.

JOHN

Oh right, well does he look more like a terrorist or the Messiah?

LASCIVIOUS

At present he looks like a little prune.

[LASCIVIOUS gets up and goes into the bathroom to get a condom. When he returns he flops down in the armchair, where subsequently his back is to the audience. He passes the condom to JOHN, who, smiling, waits for a brief moment before going over and kneeling down in front of his lover. On his knees he pulls off the jeans that LASCIVIOUS is wearing and then he tears the condom cover open with his teeth. He leans forward across LASCIVIOUS'S lap, until he is no longer in view of the audience. LASCIVIOUS throws his head back in ecstasy, because obviously the blow-job he is getting feels good.]

LASCIVIOUS

Suck it. Suck it. Suck it. Oh yeah, suck it hard. Swallow every inch of it. Take it all the way. Oh yeah, suck it good and hard. Put it all the way down your throat. Swallow it. Oh yeah, suck it, baby, suck it. Suck it. Oh, God! [Both men can be heard having a orgasm. Drunk and naked LASCIVIOUS stands. JOHN curls up in the armchair invisible to the audience. He lights a cigarette and streams of smoke are seen above the back of the chair. LASCIVIOUS staggers out of the apartment. Upon reaching his pile of clothing just off stage he immediately becomes sober, and while getting dressed in his suit and tie he slowly recites another narration.]

LASCIVIOUS [The tone of his voice is casual and conversational.] At some point in time an ejaculation of semen has sent the HIV virus into my blood stream. Still, I have faith in everlasting life, because behind that bedroom door the infant Messiah lies in wait and I believe that with his birth salvation has been brought to us all; the saints, and the sinners, the sick, and the well, the hungry, and the homeless, the hopeful, the unhappy, the rich, and the poor. All men and women, with no preference to what part they play, will be saved; and since the period of our existence, between our entrance on earth and our exit into the unknown, is merely a phase (from which we all must pass at some point in time to the hereafter) I should like to say once again, "All the world's a stage." [LASCIVIOUS steps back into the apartment and subsequently into character. Once more his movements are those of man who's been drinking heavily. Unsteadily he stands by the armchair, where JOHN is still sitting in silence. A flash of lightening illuminates the stage, thunder sounds in the background and by and large the baby begins to cry.]

CURTAIN

ACT TWO

[The curtain rises and it is later that same evening. LASCIVIOUS is sleeping on the sofa. Except for the occasional flash of lightening, which is far less frequent now, both of the apartments are enveloped in darkness. Rain falling and water gurgling into the gutters are audible in the background. Following this men's voices are heard in the hallway just prior to the sound of a key opening the front door of the apartment stage left. The door opens only half way, as a flash of lightening reveals the hand that reaches into the room to turn on a light. A roll of thunder reverberates in the distance, as SEMEN and EMBRYO enter the apartment. They are both in their mid twenties, but they have a haggard look that makes them appear older. SEMEN is wearing blue jeans, a T-shirt, and a denim jacket. EMBRYO has on a cheap polyester suit. They are both dripping wet from the rain. EMBRYO is carrying a briefcase under his arm, which he places on a card table in the center of the living room. He takes a gun out of his suit pocket and places it on the table as well. Stripping down to their underwear the two men dry themselves off with a pair of tattered bath towels. SEMEN is muscular, athletic looking, tattooed, and tough. EMBRYO is gaunt, skinny, and rather ratlike in appearance. The latter one lights a cigarette.]

SEMEN

Hey, honey, you home? Ovary, Ovary. [He looks in the bedroom.]

EMBRYO

She ain't here, so stop your hollering, before you wake up the whole building. [He crosses the room and peers out the window into the park. Facing the audience another flash of lightening shows the scar on the side of his face, which looks like a souvenir from a knife fight.]

SEMEN

What are you looking for?

EMBRYO

Cops.

SEMEN

Well stay away from the window. You can be sure they're still looking for us.

EMBRYO

Since when did you start giving the orders?

SEMEN

Since I married your sister.

EMBRYO

If she'd listened to her older brother at the time she'd still be single and sweet sixteen instead of pregnant and married to a bum like you.

SEMEN Sorry to disappoint you, brother-in-law, but nobody can stay sweet sixteen

forever.

EMBRYO [He stomps over to the card table and sits down. There he proceeds to open the briefcase. On top of the pile of money that is inside there are two stocking masks. He takes them out and stretches one of the nylons over his face.] This is a stick up. [Laughing he tosses both of the stocking masks at SEMEN.] That was some heist we pulled off. I bet there's close to a quarter of a million dollars here.

SEMEN
A lot of good it's going to do us behind bars, you trigger happy son of a bitch. You didn't have to kill that guard.

EMBRYO [counting the money]
You're right, I could have let him fire the first shot and with any luck he would have hit you.

SEMEN [ignoring EMBRYO'S remark] I need a fucking fix. Where's the stash?

EMBRYO
I imagine it's where it always is. [He stops counting the money. He gets up and goes into the kitchen, which is connected to the living room and can be clearly seen by the audience. He gets a can of beer from the refrigerator. SEMEN has gone into the bedroom.] Fix me one while you're at it, and when you're heating up the heroin make damn sure you don't waste any. And don't lock the bathroom door. Last time I had to kick it down to get to you.

SEMEN
No one asked you to. [Reappearing from the bedroom he goes into the bathroom, closes the door, and makes a considerable amount of noise.]

EMBRYO [drinking his beer at the card table he continues to count the money] Hurry up in there. How can anyone take so long to shoot up?

SEMEN [shouting]
Wait your turn, will ya. [SEMEN comes out of the bathroom not long after. He is obviously stoned. His movements are much more animated, but also slower. The tourniquet is still tied tightly around his upper arm. EMBRYO shakes his head. He stands up, unties the tourniquet, and then goes into the bathroom to take his turn.]

SEMEN
I wonder where Ovary is?

EMBRYO [talking through the bathroom door] Don't worry, she'll be back, brother-in-law. She might walk out on you without a word, but she'd never leave without saying good-bye to her brother.

SEMEN [softly to himself]

Don't be to sure about that.

EMBRYO [Coming out of the bathroom he is also high on heroin, but he is less lethargic than his brother-in-law.] Hey, before I forget we've got to find a safe place for the money

SEMEN [scanning the apartment] It's gotta be some place where no one will look.

EMBRYO
How 'bout in your pocket?

SEMEN
Very funny.

EMBRYO [laughing]
If ya prefer we could put it all in my pocket?

SEMEN
You know where you can stick your share. [looks around some more] What about in the stove, or under the bed where we keep the dope? [Together they start searching the apartment for a place. After several stupid suggestions from both men they decide to hide it in the babies crib, which is in one corner of the living room closest to the stage. The same corner where the Christmas tree stands in LASCIVIOUS'S apartment. They bury the stack of bills beneath the mattress.]

EMBRYO [sitting at the card table] So what are you going to do with your share of the loot?

SEMEN
Haven't decided yet. Probably buy a house for me and Ovary.

EMBRYO
And live happily ever after.

SEMEN
What are you gonna do?

EMBRYO
That ain't none of your business, brother-in-law.

SEMEN
Then why'd ya ask me?

EMBRYO
You're married to my sister, that makes it my business.

SEMEN

Well, it's Ovary's decision what she wants to do with her share, and my share. Whatever she wants is fine by me. Her heads better than the one on both of our shoulders put together. I'll tell ya one thing we're gonna do for sure, man. We're gonna quit doin' drugs.

EMBRYO

Good luck.

SEMEN

You just wait, brother-in-law, before you know it we're gonna be living the good life, but you ain't gonna be around to see it happen, cause you're gonna be dead if you keep on doin' as many hits a day as ya have been.

EMBRYO [standing up]

Whatever you say, Semen. The sun's coming up. It's morning already. Let's get some sleep.

SEMEN

You go ahead. I'm gonna wait up for Ovary.

EMBRYO

Suit yourself, but she's probably staying overnight at her girlfriends. If I were you I'd go to bed. [EMBRYO goes into the bedroom, while SEMEN makes a bed for himself on the pull out sofa in the living room. After he turns off the overhead light he sits smoking a cigarette in silence and semi darkness. The storm has stopped. Retiring into a recumbent position on the pull out sofa he falls asleep. Light gradually seeps into both of the apartments from the sunrise. A bird can be heard singing it's morning song. The sound of traffic on the street below pervades both apartments and then finally the scene is consumed by the dawning of the day. SEMEN is snoring on the sofa. EMBRYO is tossing and turning in the bedroom and he is visible to the audience, for the door is open fully. He appears to be having a bad dream. In the apartment next door, LASCIVIOUS is still asleep on his sofa. There is an empty Scotch bottle and two glasses with whiskey still in them on the coffee table. JOHN has gone home. The bedroom door in LASCIVIOUS'S apartment opens slowly with a creaking sound. OVARY comes out of the bedroom very unsure of her surroundings. She is holding onto the newborn baby, which is wrapped in a blanket. She spots LASCIVIOUS on the sofa sound asleep. She smiles. She is a very pretty girl. Her hair is auburn in color, wavy, and medium in length. Her complexion is pale, clear, and freckle free. She is nineteen, but not the least bit naive. She is in desperate need of a fix, and this frustration shows fully on her face and in her eyes. The baby starts to cry. Sitting down in the armchair, that was moved sometime in the middle of the night, she is now facing the audience. LASCIVIOUS opens his eyes almost immediately. He moans and stretches as he rises into a sitting position. He is wearing the bottoms to a pair of pajamas.]

LASCIVIOUS [groggily]

Good morning. Are you all right? Do you need anything? How's the baby?

OVARY [She has begun to breast feed.] I'm fine, and so is the baby.

LASCIVIOUS
Have you been up long?

OVARY
No, I just woke up. Thank you again for letting me stay overnight. I have no idea where my husband or my brother are? I don't even know your name? Mine's Ovary.

LASCIVIOUS
Lascivious.

OVARY
When did the storm stop?

LASCIVIOUS
Some time early this morning I suppose. Are you sure I can't get you something? A pillow?

OVARY [She shakes her head and speaks softly.] No, really, I'm fine. Maybe a cup of coffee if it's not too much trouble?

LASCIVIOUS [Standing up he is unsteady on his feet and he finds himself weaving.] No trouble at all, but something tells me I drank way too much last night. I don't even remember when my friend went home. [He goes into the kitchen and puts on the electric kettle, and waits for the water to boil.] Do you take cream and sugar?

OVARY
Yes, please, plenty of both. Did you sleep all right on the sofa. It doesn't look very comfortable?

LASCIVIOUS
It's not as bad as it looks. Besides I drank so much I don't even remember going to bed.

OVARY
Celebrating New Year's Eve early?

LASCIVIOUS
Yeah, something like that. By the way, does the little guy have a name yet?

OVARY
Not yet. We can't decide what to call him. You don't mind if I smoke?

LASCIVIOUS
Go right ahead. There should be an astray on the coffee table.

OVARY

Would you happen to have an extra cigarette?

LASCIVIOUS
I think there are some Marlboro Lights on the coffee table as well. Help yourself. [He carries two cups of coffee into the living room.]

OVARY [lighting a cigarette while the baby continues feeding] Thanks. Where was I when you found me? I don't remember much.

LASCIVIOUS
You were lying in the hallway just outside my door. You were crying and you were half unconscious.

OVARY
Wow. Was I really? The last thing I remember... Oh, it's not important.

LASCIVIOUS
Are you sure you're going to be all right?

OVARY
I'll be fine. I'm just feeling a little jittery.

LASCIVIOUS
Your hands are shaking.

OVARY
Are they? I didn't notice. Maybe when you finish your coffee you could do me a favor and go next door to see if the boys are back yet? There's no hurry. If they're home they're probably sleeping. [She looks around the apartment.] Our apartments are identical, but yours is much nicer than my brother Embryo's. Me and my husband, Semen, are staying with him until we can afford to get our own place. You live alone, don't you?

LASCIVIOUS
Yes, I do. How did you know?

OVARY
You're very neat. You have everything organized and all of your possessions seem to be in little rows. If there were two people in the apartment it would be impossible to keep it this spotless.

LASCIVIOUS
Unless both people were equally compulsive.

OVARY
Which isn't too likely. [laughing] I'm compulsive too, but not when it comes to cleaning.

LASCIVIOUS
Well, you're very astute.

OVARY
What is astute?

LASCIVIOUS
It means you're perceptive.

OVARY
Oh. I didn't get very much schooling. I don't usually tell people, but I can't read or write very well. I have a good memory for a big word when I hear it, but I usually have to ask the person what it means and sometimes it's embarrassing, but it's better than being illiterate. Semen and my brother are no help, but Semen is street smart. I have never heard of the word astute before. How far did you go in school?

LASCIVIOUS
I went all the way.

OVARY
College?

LASCIVIOUS
I went to university.

OVARY
Wow. What do you do?

LASCIVIOUS
I work on Wall Street. I'm a stockbroker.

OVARY
Really. You must think I'm stupid?

LASCIVIOUS
Not at all. You can't be astute and stupid at the same time.

OVARY
Oh, I think you can.

LASCIVIOUS
I think you're right, and that in itself is very perceptive, which proves you're not stupid after

all.

OVARY [smiling]
Ok, you win. [looking down at the baby] He must be hungry.

LASCIVIOUS
Is this your first baby?

OVARY
Yeah. Why, is it that obvious. Am I doing something wrong?

LASCIVIOUS
Not as far as I can tell. You just seem so young?

OVARY
I'm nineteen and I don't feel young at all. You seem awful young as well to be a stockbroker?

LASCIVIOUS
I'm twenty nine.

OVARY
My husband just turned twenty five. I hope he's out looking for work. He hasn't been home for a few days. Who was the man who helped me deliver the baby?

LASCIVIOUS
He's a friend of mine. He's a doctor. You were in good hands.

OVARY
Were you in the bedroom when I had the baby?

LASCIVIOUS
No. I looked in once or twice in the beginning, but after that I stayed out here.

OVARY [laughing]
Most men get sick to their stomach when they see a baby being born, but they can beat each other in the face with brass knuckles and not think anything of all the blood. It doesn't make much sense, does it?

LASCIVIOUS
No it doesn't, but it wasn't the blood that bothered me. It was the fact that you seemed to be in so much pain. You were in labor for a long time, and you did a lot of screaming.

OVARY

I don't remember much. It's all a big blur. I remember that doctor kept on telling me to push and to take deep breaths, but that's about all.

LASCIVIOUS
Hey, it just occurred to me that he was born on Christmas day.

OVARY [beaming]
I know. I thought that too when I was in labor last night at eleven o'clock. I was hoping he'd come out before midnight and sure enough he did. He was born at a quarter to twelve December 25th. I know because I looked over at your alarm clock. Now, I just have to name him.

LASCIVIOUS [jokingly]
How about Nicholas?

OVARY
No, even when I was a kid I never believed in Santa Claus. I guess because there were never any presents under our tree. Come to think of it there was never any tree.

LASCIVIOUS
That's terrible.

OVARY
Well it could have been worse, so I don't feel sorry for myself. But, at times it was a trib-u-la-tion. I learned that word last week. It sort of means to suffer.

LASCIVIOUS [Smiling affectionately, he stands up.] I'll go next door to see if there's anybody home. Will you be all right by yourself for a minute?

OVARY
You worry too much. I keep telling you I'm fine. And if my husband's home drag him back by the balls, will ya? [He leaves his apartment and almost immediately after he does a knock is heard in EMBRYO'S apartment. SEMEN is already awake and has been seen by the audience stumbling blindly into the bathroom, just prior to LASCIVIOUS'S knocking.]

EMBRYO
Who is it? [He throws the bedroom door wide open and nervously looks towards the front door. You can tell by his paranoid behavior that he thinks the knocking is the police.]

LASCIVIOUS
It's your neighbor from next door.

EMBRYO [relaxing]
What d'ya want?

LASCIVIOUS [shouting]
It's about your wife. She's in my apartment. She's had the baby.

SEMEN [Bursts out of the bathroom and rushes to open the door, while at the same time trying to do up the zipper on his jeans.] Is she all right?

LASCIVIOUS
She's fine. Come and see for yourself. [Together they disappear into the hallway and then reappear in LASCIVIOUS'S apartment; and while EMBRYO lights a cigarette he stares blankly out the living room window that overlooks the park.]

EMBRYO [flicking his cigarette derisively] Another fat mouth to feed.

SEMEN
Ovary, honey, are ya all right? What happened?

OVARY
What do you think happened? I had the baby for God's sake.

SEMEN
Why didn't ya go to the hospital?

OVARY
I was unconscious, and well, you know why. [She looks down at the infant feeding and after prying him away from her breast she holds him out for her husband to see. SEMEN kneels down on the floor in front of his wife. "What is it?" he asks.] He is a boy.

SEMEN [Hugging his wife and child at the same time.] Sweetheart, I'm sorry I wasn't here with you. [He kisses her several times on the forehead.]

OVARY [Looking up at LASCIVIOUS.] Our neighbor was very kind. He found me in the hall. I don't know what I would have done if he hadn't helped me.

LASCIVIOUS
I'm just glad I found you when I did.

SEMEN [He jumps to his feet and vigorously shakes LASCIVIOUS'S hand.] Thank you. Thanks a lot. If there's ever any way that I can repay ya?

LASCIVIOUS [With a grin on his face he peers at the baby.] One look at that precious face is payment enough.

SEMEN
Come on, Ovary, let's go home and get ya into bed. [He helps her up out of the chair.]

LASCIVIOUS [Looking directly at OVARY with concern.] You and the baby should both go see a doctor once you are feeling up to it.

SEMEN
I'll make sure they do. [SEMEN and OVARY leave LASCIVIOUS'S apartment and go into their own. EMBRYO, who has been in the bathroom, flushes the toilet and comes out right after they arrive.]

OVARY
Uncle Embryo, say hello to your nephew.

EMBRYO [uncomfortable]
Hello, kid. [He looks at SEMEN.] Did you tell her the good news?

SEMEN
Not yet. There's plenty of time for that latter. [He looks sheepishly away from his wife who is watching him intently.]

OVARY
What good news? Tell me now.

SEMEN
All right. We robbed an armored truck for a quarter of a million dollars and two thirds of it is ours. We can go anywhere in the world you want. Just you and me and the baby. We'll be a family just like the ones we see on the TV. We'll buy a station wagon and a house in the suburbs. We'll straighten ourselves out. If we have to we'll even get professional help in order to kick. We'll send our son to the best school we can find. I want him to have everything we didn't when we were growin' up, but most importantly he'll have two parents he can be proud of and parents that love him. Don't be mad, honey, I did it for us.

EMBRYO [excitedly]
It was amazing, sis. The cops chased us all over Manhattan. We finally lost them in Times Square. It was a close call.

OVARY [Shaking her head she is obviously annoyed, but not too upset to see that a quarter of a million tax free dollars is a lot of money and the chance for a better life. She puts the baby into the crib and covers him with a blanket.] You guys both promised me you wouldn't pull anymore stupid stunts after you held up that liquor store, so what do you do, you go out like a couple of brainless bandits and rob an armored truck? You don't tell me anything about it and you leave me alone Christmas day to have the baby. You're both lucky that right now I'm in so much pain I don't care about anything. Not even the money. There's only one thing in this world that will make me feel better and if you dare tell me we don't have any drugs stashed I'll cut off both of your dicks. I don't understand why, when it comes to procreation, men get all the pleasure and women get all the pain? I hurt inside and out. I've just been torn in two. I'm dying for a fix.

EMBRYO [solicitously]
I'll get one ready for you sis. We got lots. [He goes into the bedroom.]

OVARY [hugging her husband] Are you going to have a hit with me? You know how I hate to get high alone.

SEMEN
I thought we decided one of us ought to stay straight once the baby was born? And you know what, I've been thinking. What have the drugs done to him? I mean, I wonder if he's addicted? I've heard how hard heroin can be on an unborn baby. He looks awful small. Ovary, I don't know what I'll do if he's got brain damage, or if he's deformed in any way because of all the drugs we've done. And what will happen if he goes into withdrawal? What are we going to do? [Pause.] We're going to make it up to him one day, Ovary. I swear we are.

OVARY
I'm worried too, Semen. I tried to stop, but I couldn't. You know how hard I tried. You saw how hard it was for me. I'm just too weak. And that's why I didn't want to go to the hospital. I didn't want them to know I'm a junkie. I was afraid they'd take my baby away. [EMBRYO comes back holding a hypodermic needle. He scowls, for the baby has begun to cry. All three of them stand by the crib staring down at the infant without doing a thing, as it continues to cry. EMBRYO absentmindedly passes his sister the needle and then he sits down at the card table. The others follow. SEMEN ties the tourniquet tightly around his wife's upper arm and then slightly bent over, with her back to the audience, she injects herself. After becoming slightly rigid, she immediately relaxes and releases a great sigh of relief. EMBRYO begins cleaning his revolver with a rag. Appearing from the bathroom after having a shower LASCIVIOUS frowns and turns his head towards the wall that separates the two apartments, for the baby is still crying. He listens for a while and then he hastily turns up the volume on his TV. He is watching the news. They are talking about war, an earthquake, increasing pollution, and the weather forecast for the following day. A snowstorm is predicted. He turns the TV off with the remote control and reaches for the phone. He calls JOHN.]

LASCIVIOUS
Hi, it's me. A little hung over. What are you doing? Do you want some company? Have your parents arrived? Ok, I'm on my way. See you soon. [He hangs up the phone, finishes dressing, and leaves the apartment.]

SEMEN [Speaks warningly towards EMBRYO, who is still polishing the revolver.] You should get rid of that gun.

EMBRYO
I will, brother-in-law, when the time's right. Right now I'd be happy if somebody would shut that kid up. His crying is driving me crazy. What's he bawling about, anyhow?

OVARY [Under the influence of heroin she is happy and without a care in the world.] He

needs his diaper changed.

SEMEN
I'll do it. Where are the diapers?

OVARY
There in the bedroom.

EMBRYO [chuckling]
Bring out the stash while you're in there, daddy. [Semen returns with the diapers in one hand, while in the other he has several hypodermic needles and a small package of powder. He gives the latter two to EMBRYO.]

SEMEN
Here you go, Uncle Embryo. Have it all. Put it all into one big syringe and stab yourself in the throat.

EMBRYO [laughing]
You'd like that wouldn't ya, brother-in-law? All the more money for you, and my kid sister.

SEMEN [by the crib]
Ovary, I don't know what I'm doing. What should I wipe his bum with?

EMBRYO
Your finger, asshole!

OVARY [struggling to stand]
Here let me do it. Go have a hit with Embryo, and try to get along. Your bickering is worse than the baby's crying. Why don't the two of ya try to come up with a name for him? [SEMEN sits down at the card table with his brother-in-law, who is heating up the heroin, and they do their best to ignore each other. After OVARY is done diapering the baby on the sofa she places him back in the crib, where he lies quietly. She joins the men at the card table. SEMEN and EMBRYO inject themselves at the same time with separate syringes. They start to recite names for the baby, and there are several moments of silence between each of the names they suggest: "David," "Peter," "Mark," "Philip," until finally they stop and silence permeates the apartment, for all three characters are in a euphoric state. Continuing to sit at the card table a unison of movement, such as swaying and rocking back and forth, exists between the three individuals; while the gradual, although accelerated, darkening of the apartment indicates the passing of time. The baby has begun to cry faintly, but none of them seem to even notice his presence. His crying increases, as the apartment fades into complete darkness. Their three silhouettes are seen moving about, as they get up from the card table to go to bed. Somebody bumps into an inanimate object and curses. The baby cries continuously, but no one goes near the crib.]

[It is nighttime now. A full moon has risen in the sky and can be seen by the audience through the kitchen window of EMBRYO'S apartment; while a street lamp and several stars are visible through LASCIVIOUS'S kitchen window. The moonlight and the streetlamp flood the

otherwise darkened apartments. EMBRYO is sleeping in his bedroom. He tosses and turns even more dramatically than he did the night before. He is having a very bad dream and occasionally he will call out in his sleep some unrecognizable word. SEMEN and OVARY are sleeping on the pull out sofa in the living room. SEMEN'S snoring is much more pronounced than it was the previous night. The baby's crying has turned into a constant wail, which awakens no one.]

[Enter TESTOSTERONE and ESTROGEN down the center aisle of the auditorium through the audience. They come into the apartment from the front of the stage by way of the imaginary windows, which they pretend to pass through with miraculous powers. They are angels dressed in long white flowing gowns trimmed with flounces. Their movements are very fluent. From the halos on their heads to the slippers on their feet they are covered with silver and gold colored confetti that sparkles effervescently in the moonlight. With both of them having hair the color of honey and rapturously beautiful faces that are identical looking their only distinct difference is their gender, which can not readily be discerned by their outward appearance. They are the epitome of perfection in their androgyne. Stopping by the baby's crib they stand side by side, look at each other, and shake their heads. After displaying their disbelief, in the living conditions of the baby, they bend over to examine more closely the sobbing infant. Straightening themselves up they look at each other and smile.]

TESTOSTERONE [whispering] It is the Holy One. He has the sign of the cross on the palm of both hands.

ESTROGEN

Hush, little one. You have no reason for tears. [The baby is soothed by the sweet sound of the angels voices and he stops crying instantly.]

TESTOSTERONE

He seems to be well enough, considering the environment he was born into.

ESTROGEN

Shall we awaken the mother?

TESTOSTERONE

Allow me. [He waves his arms emphatically and a stream of silver and gold colored confetti goes flying across the room.]

[OVARY bolts upright in bed and she gasps when she sees the angels.]

OVARY

Who are you? What do you want?

TESTOSTERONE

Do not be afraid. I am Testosterone.

ESTROGEN

And I am Estrogen. We are angels sent from heaven above. We are here to tell you that you

child is the Son of God.

OVARY [Shaking her head and rubbing her eyes she gets out of bed and stumbles towards the crib. Standing between the two angels with an enormous amount of uncertainty and disbelief she shakes her head again.] What did you say? I must be dreaming. Who are you?

ESTROGEN
We are angels.

OVARY [fearful]
What do you want?

TESTOSTERONE
Do not be alarmed, Ovary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you have conceived in your womb, and you have borne the Son of the Almighty in your earthly body, and you shall name him Lord Jesus.

ESTROGEN
It is true, Ovary, we are angels sent from heaven. We are here to tell you that your child is the long awaited Savior, the Son of God. You were chosen to give birth to the Messiah.

OVARY
Me? But how can that be? I'm not a virgin? And besides my husband is the father.

ESTROGEN
Semen is sterile. He has a O sperm count, so he could not possibly be the father of this child.

OVARY
I don't believe you.

TESTOSTERONE
After we're gone check the palm prints on the hands of the baby.

TESTOSTERONE & ESTROGEN
Blessed be this child. [Leaning simultaneously over the crib they make the sign of the cross and then together they leave the same way they came. OVARY runs to turn on the overhead light and rushes to the sofa where SEMEN is still sleeping soundly.]

OVARY [shouting]
Semen, wake up. Wake up, Semen. Semen!

SEMEN [confused]
What is it? Is it the baby? Is he all right? What's the matter?

OVARY [excitedly]
There were angels here, Semen, and they told me that our baby is the Son of God.

SEMEN [laughingly]
You had a dream, Ovary. Drug induced no doubt. Now come back to bed. [The baby starts to scream again and EMBRYO comes out of the bedroom.]

EMBRYO [shouting]
For God's sake, can you keep that kid quiet? He's been crying all night. How can I get any sleep?

SEMEN
Ovary had a bad dream.

OVARY [defensively]
It wasn't a dream.

SEMEN
She thinks she saw some angels.

OVARY
No, Semen, I know I saw them. I know I saw them. It wasn't a dream. They were here. It was real. They were standing right here.

EMBRYO [yawning]
It was the drugs, sis. I see things all the time. I remember once when I thought I was talking to a dog. We had a four hour conversation and I could have sworn he was holding up his end of it until I came down off the drugs and realized he'd been taking a nap and ignoring me.

OVARY
I don't think so, Semen. This wasn't the same. It was too real. They even told me their names, but [pause] I can't remember. Maybe, they will come back? [Turning her head from side to side several times she looks frantically all around the apartment expecting them to reappear.]

EMBRYO
Sure sis, they'll come back as soon as you shoot up some more.

OVARY [angered]
I wasn't stoned. I swear to God. Two angels told me that our baby is the Son of God. They told me that I was chosen to be the Mother of the Messiah.

EMBRYO [cynically]
Did they happen to mention why?

OVARY
No, they didn't, but they said he was the Savior. I swear, on a stack of Bibles. I told them Semen was the father, but they said that was impossible, because...

SEMEN
Because why?

OVARY
It was nothing.

SEMEN
Tell me what you were going to say.

OVARY
The angels said something about your being sterile. They said you have a O sperm count. They also told me what to name him.

SEMEN
Jesus Christ, Ovary, you wake me up in the middle of the night to tell me I'm not the father of our baby, because some angels you think you saw tell you I'm sterile and for God's sake you seem to be happy about it? I'm going back to bed.

EMBRYO [shaking his head] I'm goin' back to bed as well, and if you two are gonna fight I'd appreciate it if you'd wait until tomorrow. Meanwhile, keep that kid quiet will ya?

OVARY
Oh wait, there's one other thing.

SEMEN [about to get into bed] What is it now?

OVARY
They also told me after they were gone to check his palm prints. [She says this while on her way to the crib. She studies both of the baby's hands and a reverent look of fear and confusion fills her face, so much so that SEMEN begins moving towards her instinctively and EMBRYO steps out of the doorway. OVARY backs away from the crib without ever removing her eyes from the infant.] Look, look at his hands. He has a cross on both of his palms. [SEMEN and EMBRYO both check]

EMBRYO
I'll be damned, she's right, but they could be birthmarks?

SEMEN
Identical birthmarks on both hands? Besides they're prints.

EMBRYO [incredulously]

So what are ya saying? Are ya saying you believe her?

SEMEN [shrugging his shoulders and shaking his head] I don't know what to believe?

OVARY

Well I do. I know what I saw and I know what I heard, and he has hundreds and hundreds of lines on his hands that have an - oh what is the word? - an in-dis-put-able design. [Stooping over the crib she picks up the crying infant and croons.] My baby. My sweet baby, Jesus. [Rocking him self-indulgently back and forth in her arms she softly starts to sing.]

Rock-abye, baby,
On the tree top,
When the wind blows,
The cradle will rock;
When the bow breaks,
The cradle will fall,
And down will come Jesus
Mankind and all.

CURTAIN

ACT THREE

[When the curtain rises SEMEN and OVARY are getting ready to leave New York. They have not had a hit of heroin all day and as they pack their suitcases it is apparent that they are in the early stages of withdrawal. EMBRYO is not at home. JOHN and LASCIVIOUS are sitting on the sofa watching the New Years Eve celebration in Times Square on the TV.]

JOHN

I'm glad we decided to stay home tonight. This is much better than being surrounded by a bunch of boisterous people. It's too cold outside anyhow. We're supposed to be getting another snowstorm later tonight.

LASCIVIOUS

I was out earlier and the wind was blowing. It's certainly starting to feel like winter.

JOHN

Well, it was bound to happen sooner or later. I always look forward to the first snow, but after it falls it's a barrage of brown slush in the city from then until spring.

LASCIVIOUS
We should go to Florida for a few months. I have a little money put away and I could take some time off work.

JOHN
I've always wanted to go to Key West.

LASCIVIOUS
I've heard that Ernest Hemingway and Tennessee Williams both had homes there.

JOHN
It must be an inspiring place.

LASCIVIOUS
We can leave whenever you want, but right now I think that despite my HIV status this is the happiest New Years Eve I've ever had.

JOHN
And on top of our being together we have a newborn baby all to ourselves.

LASCIVIOUS
I wonder if we should warm up his bottle ahead of time? He's going to be hungry when he wakes up.

JOHN [getting up off the sofa] I can do it.

LASCIVIOUS
On second thought, maybe we should wait until he's awake?

JOHN
[sits back down] You're right, it will just get cold.

LASCIVIOUS
Considering how much you hate kids you certainly seem to be enjoying yourself? If I didn't know better I'd say you were a paragon of paternalism.

JOHN
There's a big difference between babysitting and the responsibility of rearing one of your own.

LASCIVIOUS
Just the same, Jesus seems to have taken a liking to you.

JOHN

Don't you think that's a strange name for them to call their kid? I mean, Jesus is going to be a hard name to live up to.

LASCIVIOUS
The hardest in the history of the human race.

JOHN
How come you're babysitting anyhow?

LASCIVIOUS
I volunteered. Ovary came over this afternoon to tell me her and her husband are leaving town tonight. She said she had a lot of packing to do, so I told her we were staying home and wouldn't mind looking after him.

JOHN
I'm glad you did. And I must say he looks much healthier than I imagined he would considering the condition his mother is in.

LASCIVIOUS
It's sad really. I talked to her again this morning. She's actually a very nice girl. She's very bright as well, but uneducated and a bit confused. I told her to stop breast feeding the baby, because of the drugs, so she started him on a bottle this afternoon. Don't be surprised if he fusses when we feed him.

JOHN
What's her husband like?

LASCIVIOUS
He seems to be a decent guy. He's also an addict, but there's something very earnest and sincere about him. I've only talked to him once, yet I got the impression he's very determined to better himself.

JOHN
And her brother?

LASCIVIOUS
I guess he's what you'd call the bad seed in the bunch. I've seen him in the hallway a couple of times and he looks like the kind of creepy character you'd expect to find in a novel by Charles Dickens. He's got beady eyes and a big scar on the side of his face that his sister said he got from a fight he had with their father. Apparently he shoved Embryo's face into a pane of glass. From what I gather Ovary and her brother were both born in the Bronx. I've noticed that whenever I see Embryo he never smiles or says hello or even acknowledges my presence when passing. He had an argument with the landlady last week. It seems he's always behind in his rent and she told him he had until the end of the month to pay. He terrorized her in the hallway telling her she

had until the end of the month to live. I'm sure it was a theoretical threat, but the landlady is in her seventies, so it was a fairly vicious thing to say.

JOHN

To say the least. I don't know why you stay in this building? I've got plenty of room and I live in a much nicer neighborhood.

LASCIVIOUS

Oh, it's really not that bad. Considering some of the unsavory characters that come and go it's surprisingly safe.

OVARY [OVARY stops packing for a moment and looks up at her husband, who is stuffing clothes haphazardly into a suitcase.] I'm telling you, Semen, sweetheart, it wasn't a dream and it wasn't the drugs. All week long I've had some doubts about what happened, but the more I think about it the more I'm convinced those angels were real. I can't explain it, but I know in my heart, in my soul, that he is the Son of God, and how else can you explain the crosses on the palms of his hands?

SEMEN

I don't want to talk about it right now. Let's just finish packing before Embryo comes back.

OVARY

I still don't feel right about running out on Embryo this way. No matter what he is my older brother and he's been good to me. At least he used to be. I don't know what's wrong with him lately. [She laughs and starts packing once again.] I remember when we were kids growing up in the Bronx we used to walk to school together. It was a very bad neighborhood and Embryo would always hold my hand. He's always been very protective of me. The kids at school would pick on us all the time, because we didn't have nice clothes. They didn't either, but our's were the worst. Our parents were very poor. My father worked part time in a shoe factory until he got fired for his drinking. My mother had diabetes and was always sick. When she died Embryo cried more than any of us. They were very close. He was her firstborn. After she died our father started to hit us and he refused to send us to school. I had to stay home to cook and clean and Embryo was sent out to work.

SEMEN

People change, Ovary. Embryo is not the same person he was when you were growing up together. The drugs have destroyed him, and if little Jesus is the Son of God then we have to get away. We have to quit drugs and in order to do that we have to get away from your brother. He's a bad influence on us both. There are a couple of things that I haven't told you. Maybe you'd better sit down.

OVARY [Having taken a seat on the sofa she looks at her husband with worry.] What is it, Semen?

SEMEN

First of all Embryo killed somebody.

OVARY [shocked]
Who?

SEMEN
One of the security guards who was driving the truck we held up.

OVARY [more shocked]
Why didn't you tell me before. Embryo a murderer? I don't believe it.

SEMEN
The only reason I'm telling you now is because ya have to know how dangerous he is. He didn't only do it because he thought he had to, he did it because he wanted to. I'm positive he enjoyed pulling the trigger.

OVARY
I've always known he was a little unstable, but I can't believe he's capable of shooting anyone. Why did you go with him? I don't understand?

SEMEN
First of all I didn't know he had any bullets in the gun. We'd talked about it and we agreed, or at least I thought we'd agreed, to use an empty gun. That way no matter what happened no one would get hurt. I had no idea he'd loaded the gun until he shot the guard and by then there was nothing I could do except keep on running. So not only did I let him talk me into holding up the truck I let him lead me into becoming an accomplice to murder.

OVARY
I don't know what to say. Are you sure the guard died?

SEMEN
Embryo shot him four or five times, and one of the bullets blew off half of his face. And like I said what makes it even worse is the way Embryo seemed to be enjoying himself. He was smiling the entire time, and afterwards he was more excited than a five year old with a new toy. I thought that maybe it was just the money that was making him so happy, but it wasn't. It was the fact that he'd committed a murder. He told me he'd never felt more powerful in his life. I don't mean to upset ya, but ya have to know.

OVARY
Couldn't the guard still be alive?

SEMEN [shaking his head]
It was on the news the next day. He died before he even got to the hospital.

OVARY

I feel sick. Do the police know what you look like?

SEMEN
I doubt it. We were both wearing stocking masks.

OVARY
I wondered where my black nylons went to. You said two things.

SEMEN
The second is I had the same dream you did, except I don't think it was a dream either. I saw two angels and the truth of the matter is they told me to get the child away from Embryo. They said he was evil and they warned me to leave right away. They said that Embryo was a threat to the Baby Jesus. I asked them if our son was the Son of God and they said he was indeed the Chosen One. They also told me their names were Testosterone and Estrogen. Do those names sound familiar?

OVARY [excited]
Yes, they were the angels. Then you do believe me? You saw them too. When?

SEMEN
Late last night. You were sleeping. Embryo was out. I'm such a sound sleeper, as ya know, but for some reason I woke up in the middle of the night and I saw them standing by the crib. They were wearing long white gowns and they had halos on their heads. When I went over to them they smiled and motioned for me to be quiet. Jesus was awake and it was the only time I've ever seen him looking peaceful. I swear to God he had a smile on his face. The angels looked so much alike that I thought maybe I was hallucinating. I tired to touch the one who called himself Testosterone, to see if he was real, but my hand passed right through him. After that I was afraid, until they told me they were also afraid. "We fear for the safety of the Messiah," they said. Then they asked me where Embryo was and I told them he was out, but that he might be back at any time. They warned me to keep a watchful eye on him. They said the "evil spirit" is inside of him. And ya know, Ovary, I believe them. Embryo has been acting awful strange lately. He's been out every night this week. He's been bragging in the bars about the robbery. He's been doing twice as much heroin as usual and he's been taking barbiturates to heighten the effects of the heroin. There's something the matter with him more so than usual. I can see something very sinister in his eyes. He's changed. I think he's losin' touch with reality and quite frankly he scares me. Early this morning before you got up I heard him in the kitchen. I pretended I was still sleeping. I saw him tip toe over to the crib and I caught him looking down at Jesus with hatred in his eyes. Pure hatred, Ovary. Pure hatred.

OVARY
Oh, Embryo looks mean even when he's being nice. It's just his way. Hardships have a way of showing up in a persons features. I will always remember my mother's face. She had sunken features and the saddest eyes I have ever seen. It's funny that I became a junkie, because when I was a kid I was terrified of needles. I grew up watching my mother inject herself daily with insulin.

SEMEN

All I know, Ovary, is that this morning your brother, Embryo, had a needle full of heroin in his hand while he was standing over the crib. If I hadn't woke up and caught him when I did I don't know what he would have done? He jumped when he saw that I was awake, but then he just smiled and said something about having to fix the baby's blanket. For as long as I live I will never forget that horrible look he had in his eyes.

OVARY

He would never hurt Jesus. I don't even want to think about it. He's my brother. He would never do anything to hurt me or my baby. He's not crazy about kids, but I know he wouldn't do anything to harm his nephew. He may be nuts enough to have killed that guard, but he would never... [shaking her head] No.

SEMEN

I wish I could be sure of that, but I'm not. And I don't see how we can ignore his behavior or the angel's warning.

OVARY

I know, you're right, and I'm glad we're leaving. It's just so hard for me to imagine my own brother... [She shakes her head again and then nods resolutely.] I have to pack the baby's things. Can you get me another suitcase from the bedroom. I think there's one in the closet.

SEMEN [stopping by the bedroom door] Did Lascivious say how long he would be able to babysit?

OVARY

He said he wasn't going out tonight. His friend John is coming over. They were going to look after Jesus together. He said they were planning on spending a quiet New Years Eve at home anyway. I told him we're catching a late flight to Los Angeles. He said we could take our time packing. I think he'd like to have children of his own, but... Oh, I also asked him not to mention we're leaving if he should happen to bump into Embryo. Then his friend John came just as I was leaving. He seems very nice too.

SEMEN

It was awful good of Lascivious to help you out the way he did when you had the baby. A lot of people would have just left you lying there. I get the feeling he's gay.

OVARY

They both are, of course.

SEMEN

I thought so.

OVARY
That doesn't bother you, does it?

SEMEN
No, of course not. It's none of my business, so why should it bother me?

OVARY
I was just wondering, because Embryo hates homosexuals. When he was a teenager he beat up his best friend when he found out the guy was gay.

SEMEN
Well, Embryo is a bigot and probably bisexual himself. And to tell ya the truth, I've met many more good hearted gay men than I have so called straight guys. [He goes into the bedroom to retrieve the suitcase.]

OVARY [voice slightly raised]
He's a nice man, anyway. When I told him we were leaving to start a new life in Los Angeles he thought it was a good idea and he wished us all the luck in the world. Then he helped me carry the baby's crib over so that Jesus would have somewhere to sleep. I showed him how to change a dirty diaper. He had never done it before. I told him that as soon as we're finished packing we'll pick up Jesus on our way. Are we taking a taxi to the airport? [SEMEN is still in the bedroom looking for the suitcase in the closet and making a considerable amount of noise. OVARY upon hearing firecrackers going off, has gone over to the window at the front of the stage to look at the fireworks being displayed in Central Park. She calls for SEMEN to "come and see the fireworks," but he does not hear her. Staring upwards, supposedly towards the firecrackers exploding in the sky, she is smiling, until she lowers her gaze to the ground where she sees something in the park that frightens her. The expression on her face instantly changes. She covers her mouth with her hand, as though to stop an involuntary scream from escaping.]

SEMEN [returning from the bedroom with the suitcase] I'm sorry, I didn't hear a word you said.

OVARY [absentmindedly]
I asked if we're taking a taxi to the airport?

SEMEN
Yeah, I'll call one as soon as we're finished packing. I can't wait to get to California. I've always wanted to go. I've heard so many good things about the west coast. And the climate is... What are you looking at? What's the matter?

OVARY [Speaking slowly with a high pitched voice she continues to stare straight ahead, while moving backwards away from the window.] It's Embryo. He's coming through the park. [Suddenly she spins around and throws her arms up in the air.] Hurry up. Hide our suitcases. Put them away.

SEMEN [He pulls her away from the window altogether. He holds her at arms length and he makes her look directly into his eyes. She tries to look away, because she does not want to hear whatever it is he has to say.] No, Ovary. Let's just leave. He can't stop us. He doesn't own you. He's your brother, not your keeper. You're just feeling weak from the withdrawal.

OVARY
I know, but he looks drunk and didn't the angels say he was dangerous? The second I saw him a chill ran through me.

SEMEN
Don't worry. I'm here and I won't let anything bad happen...

EMBRYO [EMBRYO staggers into the apartment. He is definitely drunk and it is obvious he has been doing drugs as well. He trips over one of the suitcases. His speech is slurred.] Happy New Year. [Looking around at all the luggage his countenance becomes cruel.] And why are you two little lovebirds leaving in such a hurry? Going somewhere without Uncle Embryo?

OVARY [takes a defiant step towards him] We're going away Embryo and I don't want any trouble. It's time we go our separate ways.

EMBRYO
Trouble? Don't be ridiculous. It's a free country. You can go wherever you want. Who's stopping you? And you're right the time has come. So, how 'bout a little going away celebration first? After all it's New Years Eve. I picked up a present for you both on my way home. [He pulls a package of heroin out of his coat pocket. He sits down at the card table and takes out the gun as well. He twirls it on his finger before dropping it down on the table. He grins mischievously.]

OVARY [She is on the verge of crying, for she knows she can not resist the temptation. Her voice is overflowing with emotion. She sounds as though she is trying to convince herself more than her brother.] We can't Embryo. We can't. We're going to quit. We're going to. We have to. We have to for the sake of the baby. Jesus needs parents that will provide for him. [tearful] Not a pair of addicts which is what we are.

EMBRYO [ignoring her plea]
Oh, don't be so dramatic, sis. One last hit won't hurt you. It will make your trip to wherever it is you're going all the more enjoyable. Where is the little bugger, anyway? How come I don't hear him crying. [He starts heating up the heroin.]

OVARY
We left him with Lascivious.

EMBRYO [snorts indignantly]

I wouldn't leave a pet snake with that faggot.

OVARY [wiping her eyes and sniffling] Embryo, Lascivious is a nice man. Don't be such a bigot. It's un... becoming.

EMBRYO [smiling]
How 'bout you, Semen? Do you want one last hit before you leave? It's real good stuff. The best that money can buy.
[Without saying anything SEMEN sits down and rolls up his shirt sleeve. OVARY, witnessing the weakness of her husband, quickly loses her will power as well and joins them at the card table.]

EMBRYO [filling a syringe] Who wants to go first? How 'bout you, Semen?
[SEMEN shoots up and then OVARY and then EMBRYO. The entire time OVARY keeps looking over her shoulder towards the empty corner where the crib is usually kept. She is plagued with an uneasy feeling that even heroin won't take away. If anything the drugs have heightened her apprehension.]

EMBRYO
So, where are you guys going?

OVARY
Los Angeles.

SEMEN
Alaska.

EMBRYO [smiling coldly] So you're going to Los Angeles, and you're going to Alaska. Does this mean you're getting a divorce? Or does it mean that [looking directly at SEMEN] one of you is lying?

OVARY
We're going to Los Angeles together, Embryo.

EMBRYO
And were you going to leave me any of the money, or were you planning on taking it all?

SEMEN
Just our share. [He turns abruptly to look at the empty corner and notices for the first time that the crib is gone.] Ovary, where the hell is the crib?

OVARY
I took it over to Lascivious's apartment this afternoon... [Seeing how upset her husband and brother have become she continues to explain self-consciously.] You were at the store buying bottles for the baby. I told you just a few minutes ago when you were in the bedroom. You must

not have heard me. Why, is there something wrong?

EMBRYO
The money is in the crib.

OVARY
How was I supposed to know? Why didn't you tell me? I only took it over so the baby would have a place to sleep.

SEMEN
It doesn't matter. There's no reason for them to look under the mattress. We'll get it back in a little while when we pick up Jesus.

EMBRYO
Let's hope you're right, brother-in-law, because otherwise we're going to have a dead faggot on our hands.

OVARY
Don't talk like that. Semen told me about the guard. Ma would be so ashamed of you.

EMBRYO [snarling]
Shut your mouth, sis. Ma's dead. You leave her out of this.

OVARY
Lucky for you she's dead, because if she were alive she'd die just from knowing what you did. And you know what pa would do.

EMBRYO
Well he's dead too and if that faggot found the money he'll be the next one to go.

OVARY
Even if they found the money I'm sure they wouldn't touch it.

EMBRYO
What makes you say that? And who is they?

OVARY
His friend John is visiting him and I trust them both.

EMBRYO
No one can be trusted to keep their hands off a quarter of a million dollars.

OVARY [bravely]
Not everyone cares about money the way you do.

EMBRYO

Let's hope for their sake and ours that you're right, and I bet if you ask your hubby about the hold up he'll tell you he didn't do it just for the thrill of it. Did ya, Semen?

SEMEN

No, Embryo, I did it for the money. I did it for our baby. I did it so that I can get my wife away from you.

EMBRYO [raising his voice]

Maybe my sister would like to stay. Did you ever think of that? Maybe you're brainwashing her into believing I'm no good. How 'bout it, sis? Would you like to stay here with your big brother? We can keep on getting high. It's good dope, isn't it? Did you get nice and high?

OVARY

Yeah, I'm flying, Embryo. It's the best. I can't feel a thing.

EMBRYO

Well you know, Mr. Clean, is gonna expect you to stay straight. That means no more hits. No more good times. No more happiness.

SEMEN [banging his fist down on the table] That's enough.

OVARY

He's right, Embryo. I want to quit. I shouldn't have done any tonight. Now, I'll just have to start all over again tomorrow. And, this stuff is way too powerful.

EMBRYO

It's potent, isn't it? It's practically pure.

OVARY

You're stupid. [She stands up slowly.] I'm going next door to get the baby.

EMBRYO

Don't worry about him. I'm sure the fags are taking good care of him and our money, and if not... [He picks up the gun.]

OVARY

It's almost midnight. I think I'd better go get him? We have to leave soon, anyway. When's our flight? [She starts to leave.]

EMBRYO [sounding both furious and forsaken] Just hold on a minute, sis. [He points the gun he is still holding at SEMEN, who jumps up and in doing so he accidentally knocks over the card table.]

SEMEN [shouting]

Don't point that thing at me. What's the matter with you? Are you crazy? Put it away. We're leaving right now and there's nothing you can do about it, brother-in-law, so don't even think about trying to stop us. I've had enough of you to last me a lifetime and your sister must be fifty times fed up. You're just fucking crazy, man.

EMBRYO [He takes the safety off the gun and he keeps it aimed at SEMEN.] My mind's made up. You're not going anywhere, so stay right where you are. You've turned my sister against me. You've got her convinced her baby is the Son of God. Well, I don't believe that baby's the son of anybody but you. If he doesn't have your lousy blood running through his veins I'll [He grins.] be a monkey's uncle.

OVARY
Embryo, stop it! You need help. You're not yourself. [EMBRYO looks at his sister and SEMEN lunges for the gun. The two men crash to the floor. While they are struggling the end of the year countdown begins on LASCIVIOUS'S television. When the emcee reaches the stroke of midnight the gun goes off. SEMEN stands up first. His back is to the audience, so for a moment they believe that it is EMBRYO still lying on the floor who is shot, until SEMEN turns around holding his hands across his chest. He looks down at his fists full of blood, looks at his horror stricken wife, extends his arms towards her, and then falls back down face first to the floor.]

LASCIVIOUS [Raising a glass of champagne and toasting it to the one that JOHN has raised.] Happy New Year, John.

JOHN
Did you hear something? It sounded like a gunshot? Turn the TV down. [Screaming, OVARY, runs out into the hall. She knocks on LASCIVIOUS'S door, as Auld Lang Syne is being sung on the television: "Should old acquaintance be forgot, and never brought to mind..." At this moment Lascivious turns the TV off and he is reluctant to let whomever it is into his apartment. After she calls his name he realizes it is OVARY, so he opens the door. He closes it behind her and bolts it.]

OVARY [crying]
It's Embryo. He's gone mad. He shot Semen. Call, call, call the police.

LASCIVIOUS [He hurries to the telephone and dials 911.] Could you send the police and an ambulance to Parkview Apartments... That's right, Central Park North. It's apartment 505. Hurry. Somebody's been shot.

[Meanwhile, in the apartment next door, EMBRYO stands laughing above the body of his dead brother-in-law. Frantically, he begins searching on the floor for the heroin. Upon finding the package he picks up one of the hypodermic needles that also fell off the card table. In the corner where the crib was kept he squats down and here he hurriedly heats up the heroin in a spoon that he pulls from his shirt pocket. His hands are shaking. He is heedless, however, of his spilling of the white powder. He fills he syringe with the liquid heroin and springs to his feet.

After emptying one of his sister's suitcases he starts towards the door and his first two steps are taken on top of SEMEN'S body.]

LASCIVIOUS
Calm down and tell us what happened?

OVARY
It's my brother, Embryo. He's gone berserk. He...

[Banging on LASCIVIOUS'S door EMBRYO demands to be let in. OVARY screams at him to "go away," but as soon as she does he kicks the door down in a homicidal rage. He is holding the suitcase in one hand, while the gun and the hypodermic needle are being held menacingly in his other.]

OVARY [Nearly out of her mind with hysteria.] Semen. You shot, Semen. You shot him, you bastard. You shot him. How, how could you shoot him. You killed my husband. You're horrible, horrible. I hate you. I hate you. [She tries to push her way past EMBRYO, but he stops her by the door.]

EMBRYO
Semen is dead, so forget about him. Where's the money? [He points the gun towards LASCIVIOUS and JOHN.] If you faggots move I'll kill you. [He grabs hold of his sister.] Come on, Ovary, get the money for me and then we'll leave town together.

LASCIVIOUS
Take your hands off her. She doesn't want to go anywhere with you.

EMBRYO
Shut your mouth faggot, or I'll blow your homosexual head off. [He spots the crib in the corner, so he pushes his sister aside and stomps past LASCIVIOUS and JOHN. He puts the suitcase down on the floor. Now he is holding the gun in one hand and the hypodermic needle full of heroin in his other. He raises his hands and hesitates as to which weapon he will use. Letting the needle fall to the floor he reaches into the crib and picks up the BABY JESUS that is wrapped in a blanket. He lifts the screaming infant up in the air with one hand and with his other he points the gun to the back of the baby's head. All of OVARY'S wild and vehement protests are ignored.]

OVARY [pleading]
Don't... What are you doing? Put my baby down... Embryo, don't. [EMBRYO looks at his sister with some semblance of sanity. An apologetic expression fills his face and when he lowers the gun we believe he has come to his senses, but suddenly a horrific holler escapes from his mouth that is marred by a grimacing smile as well. He hurls the baby across the room. The infant smashes into a wall not far from the Christmas tree. The BABY JESUS is dead by the time he falls to the floor beneath the tree. OVARY, crying out in agony, runs amok at her brother. Jumping on his back and pounding at him with her clenched fists she is ferocious, but he fights her off by elbowing her in the stomach and by punching her in the face. The forceful blow

knocks her off her feet. LASCIVIOUS lunges at EMBRYO as well, but he is struck twice in the temple by the butt of the gun. JOHN, who is half hiding behind the sofa, looks at LASCIVIOUS sprawled unconscious on the floor. He dashes out of the apartment to get help. OVARY, lying on her side facing the audience, slowly opens her eyes and in doing so she spots the hypodermic needle full of heroin only a few inches away from her face. Turning only her head she watches her brother, as he takes the money out from under the mattress. He too is facing the audience; and since he has his back to OVARY she is able to snatch up the needle, stand, and sneak up behind her brother without being seen. Bent over the crib he senses her presence, so he swings around abruptly. Wailing like a wild woman OVARY savagely shoves the needle into one of EMBRYO'S eyes. He screams out in pain, as she squeezes the syringe and injects the heroin into his eye.]

EMBRYO [Crouched down on his knees shrieking he pulls out the syringe and his eyeball, pulled out of it's socket, remains stuck on the end of the needle. He releases an unholy holler and starts shouting insanely.] I have been sent by Satan. I am the offspring of Satan's sperm. I am his son. I am the son of Satan. [Seeing his sister sitting on the floor, rocking the BABY JESUS back and forth in her arms, EMBRYO latches onto the lifeless infant and forces her to let go. He throws the corpse through the make- believe window and into the audience. A sound effect of glass shattering echoes throughout the auditorium when the window supposedly breaks. OVARY watches with disbelieving eyes, as the blood-soaked body of the BABY JESUS lands in the center aisle.] I am the son of the original sinner and I have served him well.

OVARY [crying uncontrollably]
Murderer. You murderer. You killed my baby. Why? Why, Embryo? Why? Why did you kill my baby, Jesus?

EMBRYO [Covering his empty eye socket with one hand and waving the gun with his other.] You and Semen weren't the only ones who were visited by... [He moans for several moments from the agony caused by his injury.] Satan himself came to see me.

OVARY
You're mad. You're out of your mind. What are you talking about?

EMBRYO [His speech is spasmodic and high pitched.] It was two weeks before you had the baby. You were at your girlfriends all afternoon. Me and Semen were planning the heist. Semen went to the store to get some more beer. I had just done a hit of heroin when Satan knocked on the door. Don't you see, the devil made me do it. [Despite the excruciating pain he is in he cackles deliberately and in a deranged way. It is the uncontrollable laughter of a lunatic.] He said I was his son. He said I was the offspring of his sperm. He told me he was my father and that that drunken bastard who used to beat me up when I was a little boy is now burning in hell. He said your baby had to die. He said if I murdered the Messiah he'd make sure we didn't get caught. He promised to help me behind-the-scenes with the robbery. And he did, Ovary, he told me which truck to hold up and he warned me when the guard was going for his gun, and...

OVARY

But, why, Embryo? Why? Why did you do it?

EMBRYO

I did it for the money. I did it for the money.

[TESTOSTERONE and ESTROGEN both come down the center aisle of the auditorium. They gently pick up the body of the BABY JESUS on their way. The sound of them stepping on broken glass is heard, as they go into LASCIVIOUS'S apartment. Shaking their heads they move towards the Mother of the Messiah, who is now kneeling down on the floor weeping. Looking up she sees the angels approaching and extending her arms she reaches out to them. Near enough now, OVARY touches her baby with both of her hands, yet she does not take the infant from the angels. When she pulls her hands away there is blood on them belonging to the baby. In a state of shock, she smears the blood on her face. Together TESTOSTERONE and ESTROGEN bless her by making the sign of the cross at the same time. Very rapidly OVARY starts to recite the Lord's Prayer. And in the midst of the prayer two policemen appear in the doorway with their guns aimed at EMBRYO.]

OVARY

Our God who art in heaven
Hallowed be thy name
Thy kingdom come
Thy will be done on earth
As it is in heaven
Give us this day our daily bread
And forgive us our trespasses
As we forgive them that trespass against us
And lead us not into temptation
But deliver us from evil.

GOD [GOD'S voice over is loud and lyrical, and neither feminine nor masculine, but androgynous sounding. A radiant white light fills the stage, while everyone onstage remains motionless, as though they were frozen instantaneously by both the white light and the voice of GOD. The POLICEMEN keep their revolvers aimed at EMBRYO, who does not move. OVARY and the angels have turned their heads upwards and they too are suspended into a state of sacred stillness.] MARK MY WORDS. I AM GOD ALMIGHTY. I AM CREATOR AND RULER OF THE UNIVERSE. I AM THE SALT OF THE EARTH. I AM THE EARTH ITSELF. I AM THE SUN THAT SHINES IN THE DAY. I AM THE STARS THAT COME OUT AT NIGHT. I AM THE BLUEPRINT BEHIND THE PLANET AND PROCREATOR OF THE HUMAN RACE. I AM THE SELF-APPOINTED SUPREME BEING AND ALL OF YOU, BELIEVERS AND DISBELIEVERS ALIKE, ARE BOTH OFFSPRING OF MY SPERM AND WELLSPRING OF MY WOMB. AS BOTH FORGIVING FATHER AND MERCIFUL MOTHER TO SEVERAL BILLION CHILDREN ON THE PLANET EARTH, I SAY, TO THY BELOVED SONS AND DAUGHTERS; ALL OF MY ARCHANGELS HERE IN HEAVEN ARE PREDISPOSED TO FEEL PITY FOR THE PREMEDITATED MURDER OF THE PROMISED ONE. NODDING MY OMNIPOTENT HEAD, IN A MANNER MOST BEFITTING FOR SOMEONE OF MY STATURE, I ACKNOWLEDGE THE INFANT'S

BIRTH BY SAYING, "THE MESSIAH HAS RETURNED FOR AN ENCORE PERFORMANCE." THEN MY ARCHANGELS INCREDULOUSLY INQUIRE, "BUT, YOUR HOLINESS, WAS THE PROMISED ONE THE PROTAGONIST IN A PLAY CALLED CHRIST: THE SEQUEL?

[A loud clap of thunder is heard and the stage is engulfed in total darkness.]

CURTAIN

BOOK THREE

Terror is Triumphant Throughout the Theater

Opening night in New York City was certifiably a disaster. To begin with the curtain was brought down with a bang at the end of the third act amidst an array of bullets. But even before the stage began exploding with the sound of gunfire the police were called by the panic stricken producer, for there had already been more than enough bloodshed by then to substantiate such a phone call. And while a team of paramedics wheeled the injured and the dying into ambulances, which were waiting one after another in the pedestrian filled street, I stood backstage sucking on a cigarette like it was my last link to life. Furthermore, I pinched my forearm more than once to convince myself that I was still alive. Everywhere I looked there were grieving friends and relatives, blood-soaked bodies, and rapacious reporters; sniffing for the story the press prowled all around the place like a pack of hungry wolves. Armed with their television cameras they gathered voraciously in the parking lot, while in the hallway of the theater building they attempted to push their way past the police to snap pictures of what they would later call "the grotesque scene." The premiere party, scheduled for after the play, was permanently postponed. And you can be sure that not a solitary soul (who was fortunate enough to survive) was drinking champagne backstage, reading reviews, or rejoicing like they would have been if Embryo had not hurled the Holy One into a wall. Despite the calamity that CHRIST: THE SEQUEL caused, the play was still destined to become a smashing success. But "bravo" was not a word in the vocabulary of anybody who had seen the opening night performance. Lest a person with a conscience, present at the premiere of the play, could bring themselves to utter the syllable "Christ" without crying.

"But, as tragic as it was," Lascivious says, "the Messiah was born onstage."

"True, but he also had his skull smashed in at the end of the third act, so I don't see how there can be any consolation found in his being crucified."

"He wasn't crucified. Embryo didn't put the baby on a cross," Lascivious quickly corrects me.

"Well, according to Webster's Dictionary crucifixion can mean severe and unjust punishment and suffering, so believe me when I say the Baby Jesus was crucified. He was killed and he was crucified and he suffered unjustly."

"I don't know why the world is so shocked. It was no worse than when he was nailed to a cross," Lascivious says.

"True again, but that was two thousand years ago. The human race has forgotten just how fanatically dangerous it can be when blinded by religious fervor."

In the days, and weeks, and months that followed there was worldwide and ostentatious coverage of the horrific event. On the front page of the New York Times (the morning after the massacre) the following headline hastily captured the country's attention: "THE BABY JESUS WAS BORN, BUT DIED LAST NIGHT ONSTAGE IN NEW YORK CITY!"

Television programs, on the night the play premiered, were interrupted for a special news bulletin. Newscasters all around the world informed the public: "A BABY MANY BELIEVE TO BE THE SPIRIT OF GOD WAS KILLED IN COLD BLOOD ON BROADWAY!"

As a matter of course ever newspaper on the planet quickly enlightened the public at large with the following captions: "THE SECOND COMING OF CHRIST HAS COME AND GONE!"

"JESUS CHRIST WAS KILLED UNMERCIFULLY BY HIS BIGGEST CRITIC THE ANTI-CHRIST!"

"FIFTEEN PEOPLE WERE MURDERED AT THE OPENING OF A BLASPHEMOUS BROADWAY PLAY!"

"PALM PRINTS ON THE BODY OF THE "BABY JESUS" PROVE TO BE AUTHENTIC SIGNS OF THE CROSS!"

"PROSTITUTE TURNED PLAYWRIGHT PENS DISASTER!"

"MADMAN SAYS, "I AM THE SON OF SATAN," SECONDS BEFORE HE SLAUGHTERS THE CAST AND CREW!"

"THEATER MYSTERIOUSLY BURNS DOWN THE FOLLOWING DAY!"

"POLICE BAFFLED BY TWO BODIES FOUND IN BASEMENT BURNED BEYOND RECOGNITION!"

It was because of all the mayhem mentioned above that the play was eventually banned. The night that I went with Lascivious to the final performance I knew that it's cancellation, although distressing to me personally, was a blessing in disguise. Undoubtedly, it had caused a great deal of controversy during it's one year run. Especially when people all across the United States could not turn a page in a newspaper or magazine without reading about the killing of Christ. Regions such as the Bible Belt of the mid west went wild when they became aware that the Holy One's death was not a New York City hoax, hearsay, or part of the play. Protestant reformists were outraged by the premise of the whole play to begin with and by the third act in particular. The Roman Catholic Church and devout Christians of the two industrialized continents considered it sacrilegious that the play was still showing, and apprehensible that it had ever been produced. The hate mail that I received, nor the death threats, did little to relieve my guilty conscience. Phone calls in the middle of the night from Christian fanatics threatening to kill me were not at all uncommon. They called me the anti-Christ. They said that I was a Satan worshipper, and they accused me of being the devil's disciple. I changed hotels several times, but I was never long in each one, for the press would never fail to find out where I was staying. They hounded me heartlessly for a statement. They even went so far as to hide a microphone and a tape recorder in one of my hotel rooms. Since the start of my career I have always refused to give interviews, for the rage I so often feel when being misquoted, but now I am downright adamant about not speaking to reporters or being photographed. I have considered leaving New York on more than one occasion. I have thought about leaving the country as well. I have fantasized about marooning myself on a desert island. I have prayed that

a spaceship would come to uplift me off the planet. I have dreamed about never writing another novel, but my writing muse tells me that I will be even more miserable. So, resigned to the fact that I will never be rescued from my writing or from the relentless pursuit of reporters, I remain in New York City a prisoner to my pen and the public; and like a man held hostage by notoriety I keep on hopping from one hotel to another. On the whole, however, New Yorkers have been extremely sympathetic and supportive. Many of them have said, "Well, the good Lord shouldn't have allowed the baby to be born in a city with such a high crime rate. If he wasn't killed when he was he would have been shot by a drug dealer by the time he was ten anyhow. Put some more mayonnaise on my sandwich. Don't forget the dill pickle, and put a move on it."

Lascivious was a tremendous help through this tumultuous time, even though, until now, our only form of communication has been over the telephone. But he would always have something soothing to say when I would tell him how the public and the press was blaming me for the death of the Baby Jesus, and all because I had been narcissistic enough to put my name on the play. "I knew I should have used a pseudonym," I complain to Lascivious, (prior to his returning to New York) and because of a bad connection he can barely hear me, so I am called upon to complain loudly.

"It will be all right. It will get better in time. Wait and see," he hollers, for I am having a hard time hearing him as well.

"It doesn't matter," I shout. "Maybe I am partially responsible, and if so I will certainly carry whatever burden of blame is required of me upon my shoulders, but I believe there is more to this matter than meets the average eye. The forces of a far higher power were at work here. What say do I have in the affairs of fate?"

"What did you say?"

"I said the forces of a far higher power were at work..."

"What?"

I yell as loud as I can. "It wasn't my fault."

Suddenly the connection clears and his voice is as hypnotic and as appealing as ever. It is also deafening, because he does not know the phone is working and he shouts the following so forcefully I fear for his vocal cords as I do for the possible rupturing of my ear drum. "If you truly believe that then stop feeling so guilty. I told you before it wasn't your fault. You were just one man who had a part to play on this wild and wonderful stage we call the world."

"I think you're right, Lascivious," I reply softly, "why even the play opens with those words of William Shakespeare. You know, Lascivious, I can accept the part that I played in the death of Christ, but I can not accept the fact that the world is in need of him now more than ever before."

"In less than a week it will be the year 2001," Lascivious says to me now, as we rise from our seats in the front row. I am taken aback, for I had forgotten that we were so near to another New Year.

Yet, irregardless of what the world requires in the twenty first century, in the way of divine intervention, Ovary had given birth to the Baby Jesus and he had been killed by the hands of Embryo, or rather by the actor playing the part of Embryo. I do not know his real name. No one does. It seems there is no record anywhere of his being born. I believe the Bible has the only record of Embryo's birth. He is called the anti-Christ. It is apparent that Embryo, the Evil one, had planned the murder right from the beginning. He had known beforehand about the upcoming birth of Christ. He had narrowed it down to the exact location where the blessed event would

take place. How he was privy to such information is beyond my realm of understanding, but like the head of a nail being hit by a hammer he had pinpointed the precise time and POW! Moreover, he not only knew who the Mother of the Messiah was going to be, he knew how to heat up heroin. He certainly knew how to shoot a gun. "Yeah, but he didn't know how to act. I never wanted to hire the ham from the beginning. I thought he stunk. He was dreadful even during the dress rehearsals," I said in my statement to the police.

"He wasn't even good in bed and he always kept his boots on," the director's emotionally scarred sister said in her statement to the police.

"So tell me everything that happened?" Lascivious says to me on our way out of the theater exactly one year after opening night. We have left by the backstage door, for we were warned by the director that Broadway Avenue is being bombarded by picketers and apparently they are trying to bully their way into the building. "But don't worry, they'll never get by the security guards lined up in the front lobby," the director says uncertainly.

"Tonight is the last performance, so isn't it pointless for them to be protesting the play?" I ask.

"Most of them look like a bunch of Bible thumping thugs from the midwest," he informs me. "They're certainly not New Yorkers."

Since Lascivious has just seen the play for the first time, after returning from Los Angeles, I find myself asking him, against my will, if he liked the play, or not? I suppose it is a natural enough thing for an author to ask, but under such derisive circumstances I find myself feeling like a flamboyant fool.

"It was tragic," he tells me noncommittally and together we hurry into a cab waiting for us just outside the theater. Soon after the intimate moment we share in the back seat makes me forget about the year we have spent apart, and in part, some of the pain the play has invoked upon me personally. Perhaps, I am foolhardy enough to think, there is still hope for a brighter tomorrow? "Tomorrow. Tomorrow," I sing to myself merrily much the same way Little Orphan Annie must have sung it right here on Broadway. And further up the block didn't the adorable Barbra Streisand sing at the top of her amazing lungs, to thousands of adoring fans, something about not wanting the world to rain on her parade? No, I vividly remember, she sang that song in the movie version. Well, nevertheless, it is not a rainstorm that I am worried about it is the sudden disappearance of that big black cloud that boggles my mind. Tonight is the first night in exactly one year that it has not been hanging over our heads and now that it is gone I find it's absence to be even more bothersome that it's presence had been. "Don't you find it uncanny that on the day the play ends the cloud evaporates?"

"It was still there when we went into the theater," Lascivious says, as he turns around in the taxi to look out the rear window, but the theater is already too far behind us for him to see that it is gone.

"It was the first thing that I noticed when we came out. I didn't mention it at the time, because I wanted to get into the cab before the crowd saw me." Since the premiere of the play I have been surrounded by more crowds of angry people than I care to remember. In lieu of the last crowd I came in contact with I now avoid them like I would a school of sharks if I were swimming in the ocean. The crowd in question was led by two ardent Christian followers, who felt obliged to badger me because of the play. "Corinthians one, chapter six, verse nine," they shouted venomously before attempting to clobber me with the quote, "Male prostitutes and homosexual offenders will not inherit the kingdom of God." I was trying to think of a clever

comeback when they became bored with their verbal abuse and began throwing rocks. Fortunately we were on Fifth avenue and the only real rocks around were the diamonds displayed in a store window. Just the same, I was aroused enough to retaliate, "I am a saint compared to you people, so stop your stone throwing," and surprisingly enough they did.

"It's all over with now, so relax," Lascivious says when he sees me shiver. He is stretched out on the seat beside me, and he looks so debonair in his tuxedo that I impulsively kiss him; as he takes a small box from the breast pocket of his overcoat and passes it to me. "It's your Christmas present," he says. "I bought it in California. I was going to give it to you before the play, but you were too busy fooling around with me in the men's room that I forgot."

"I wasn't fooling around. I was helping you put on your tuxedo," I tell him, though the truth be known it's probable that I did give him an erection and I must admit that I am slightly turned on myself at the moment, for he has never given me a gift before. I can not help wondering what it is, and I would open it immediately if I were not too busy pretending to be bashful. "Go ahead and open it," he says.

"Ok," I say and it suddenly occurs to me that since our meeting at the airport, only a few hours ago, he has told me several times how much he loves me. "I was afraid of falling in love before. I wasn't ready then for a commitment," he confesses to me once more. He can tell that I am uncomfortable, so he changes the subject by asking me more about opening night. I tell him all I know and all I can remember while unwrapping the gift. "It was a nightmare..." I begin.

Inside is a silver and gold signet ring that has the year I999 in raised writing. "It's beautiful."

"It's to commemorate the year we met," Lascivious says. "Read the inscription inside."

I read it twice just to be sure my eyes aren't playing tricks on me. To my astonishment I can see that even after the second reading it still says: "Be Mine Forever." Delighted by all his declarations of love and by the printed proposal I put the ring on my finger. Then snuggling up to the man I most want to be with I try to explain as best as I can the circumstances surrounding the Second Coming of Christ and what I shall continue to call his criminal crucifixion. "Well, on opening night in the scene where Embryo, the character, is supposed to kill the Baby Jesus we were naturally planning on using a prop. I personally saw a plastic doll being put into place by one of the stagehands. But, later somebody deliberately, and with first degree murder in mind I might add, replaced the doll with the actual, with the actual... I'm sorry, I still can't bring myself to say it."

"With the actual Son of God?"

"Yes, thank you, Lascivious, for spitting that out the way you did. Anyway, the doll was supposed to be in the crib, while Ovary's baby was supposed to be backstage with Esther, the wardrobe lady, who swears the only time she left him unattended was when she "went to the lavatory." She said that before going to the bathroom she checked the child and he was sound asleep. When she returned the only thing she noticed different was the blanket had been moved over his head, but having never been a mother herself she assumed the baby had done the deed himself. But, it was not the baby beneath that blue blanket it was the doll. By then the baby was onstage one scene away from his death."

"So obviously somebody switched them while she was in the bathroom," Lascivious says.

"Yes, but who?"

"I don't know. Who?" he asks.

"No one knows, but as long as I live I will never forget the way that Embryo seized onto the infant and the feeling of utter despair I had when he lifted the Baby Jesus over his head. I felt

helpless as I watched him hurl the baby against the wall. That act in itself was more than enough reason to bring the curtain down. The audience screamed in disgust, for like myself most of them could see that the blood on the Baby Jesus was real and that there was nothing phony about his death rattle as he lay on the floor dying. Even before that they could tell that the crying was no sound effect emanating from anywhere other than from the mouth of the airborne baby. And furthermore when Embryo lifted the infant over his head the blanket the baby was wrapped in fell to the floor, so when he pointed the gun at the baby's head everyone, particularly those in the front row, could clearly see that the child was not a doll. Then when he threw the baby they could barely believe what their own eyes were telling them. I shall never forget the flabbergasted and frightened faces of those nearest the stage. Seconds later, Lascivious and Ovary, the baby's biological mother, both reacted bravely. They realized that something was dreadfully wrong. First of all they knew that the baby Ovary had just given birth to was not supposed to be onstage, but was. Secondly, and sadly enough, they knew that the actor playing the part of Embryo had just hurled him against a wall. Of course they had no idea why. At the time no one did. So you see, Lascivious, on opening night when Lascivious lunged at Embryo it was for real, and when Ovary pounced on his back she was not acting. When she pounded at Embryo with her clenched fists she was not pretending. Furthermore, she did not fake flying across the room after Embryo punched her in the face. And she certainly wasn't fooling around when she picked up that hypodermic needle and stuck it in Embryo's eye. Nor was his writhing in pain the result of a realistic performance, for not only was it a real needle it was full of heroin. We believe that Embryo must have switched needles when he was squatting down in his apartment, just prior to kicking down Lascivious's door. The police think his original plan had been to inject an overdose into the Baby Jesus."

"What happened on opening night when Lascivious lunged at Embryo?"

"He was knocked unconscious. In keeping with the script Embryo hit him as hard as he could across the side of the head with the butt of the gun."

"What for?"

For getting in the way, I guess. For trying to save the Baby Jesus? At the time, however, Lascivious had no idea that the Baby Jesus was the Baby Jesus. He thought it was a normal human baby, but because of the kind of man he was that was all it took for him to risk his own life."

"What were the stagehands and the prop people doing while all this was going on?" Lascivious asks.

"At the time most of the cast and crew did not know what was going on. Those who were paying attention assumed at first that it was an extremely authentic performance with a pinch of audience participation."

"It's all so shocking," Lascivious says, shaking his head from side to side.

"It was appalling and to top it off it seems that Semen had been shot by a real bullet, which explains the shocked expression on his face when he was shot. In the script he was supposed to fall face down and die right after doing so, but on opening night he stayed standing holding his chest with an earnest look of surprise on his face before he finally slumped to the floor and for several moments afterwards he moved about convulsively. I thought he was improvising, for this was before the Baby Jesus was thrown against the wall, and I was planning on punishing Semen severely for ad-libbing and undoubtedly doing a long drawn out death scene like something out of Shakespeare."

"Did he die?" Lascivious asks.

"I get sick just thinking about the way he slowly bled to death all alone in that apartment. Everyone fully believed the bullet was a blank. We had no reason to suspect otherwise. We just assumed that he was lying there like the script required of him until the play was over, but of course he never got up when the curtain finally came crashing down and I might add that the final curtain (which should have been a cue for everyone to take cover) was a catharsis for Embryo to open fire. The curtain coming down brought about a cataclysmic ending to all of Embryo's evildoing."

"Why didn't someone call the police?"

"I did, and so did the producer. I didn't know it at the time, but apparently he called 911 while Embryo was making sure the Baby Jesus was dead."

"Like in the play when he takes the body away from Ovary? Lascivious asks.

"The very same way. He tore the infant away from Ovary and he flung him out into the auditorium with the most wicked gleam in his eyes. It was almost identical to the performance you saw in the play tonight. Except this evening it was most definitely a doll."

"But there was a real baby all through the second act?"

"Of course. There was a baby hired for opening night as well, but after Ovary gave birth the "infant actor" and his mother were sent home. Ovary insisted on using her own newborn in the play for the second act, which is the only act where the Baby Jesus is ever actually seen. Come to think of it the baby that was supposed to take part in the play on opening night had come down with a cold. He was cranky and crying constantly, which I believe is another reason why the director agreed to let Ovary use her newborn."

"So when did you call the police?"

"Not long after the director did. It was right after Embryo threw the baby out into the auditorium. I remember hearing the audience scream as I was running towards the pay phone. They let out one loud collective gasp after another and then they began shrieking. They were horror stricken, to say the least, when the infant landed with a thud by their feet in the center aisle. And if that was not enough to frighten them there was a madman onstage with a gun and a gaping hole in his head."

"A gaping hole in his head?" Lascivious asks.

"Oh, did I forget to mention that Embryo's eye popped out the way it did in the play. On opening night he didn't need to use the syringe with the phony eyeball given to him by the prop people. No, it was his own eye stuck on the end of the needle. Anyway, after he threw the baby into the auditorium he stood on the edge of the stage waving the gun back and forth for several moments before he began firing. I'm sure that some of the theater patrons did not know what to think. Was it real or was it make- believe? It was around then that Esther was shot..."

"Esther?"

"The wardrobe lady. She was shot in the stomach when she jumped out onstage and screamed at Embryo to stop. At this point she was the only person who knew the gun he was holding was loaded with real bullets. No one else had any idea. We still believed that Semen was acting and was unaware of what had happened in the apartment next door. Esther not only knew that he had killed Ovary's baby, but according to her she had had one of her psychic visions in which she clearly saw Embryo shooting into the audience, so before he even started she told him to stop. And Embryo, still standing at the edge of the stage waving the gun back and forth, just spun around and fired in the direction of Esther's voice. I don't believe he even

saw who he was shooting. That's when one of the stagehands brought the heavy curtain down right on top of Embryo, but he jumped to his feet, pushed his way through the curtain, and burst out to the front of the stage."

"Is that when he started shooting everyone?"

"For no apparent reason he began firing into the audience at random. People were screaming and falling down dead. Twelve people in the front row of the theater that were closest to the stage went down like ceramic ducks on a firing range. After it was over I can remember the way their corpses were all lined up one after another. Their bodies bleeding there in the front row looked like raw meat in a butcher shop. Some were slumped over while others had their heads thrown back or blown back. There was blood flowing in the aisle. There was blood sprayed on the ceiling. There was blood smeared on the stage. There was brain tissue splattered for twenty feet in every direction. Seventeen people in all died on opening night if you include the Baby Jesus, Semen, Lascivious, and the two unidentified bodies in the basement. Several more were injured when the audience ran for the exits. People were pushing and shoving and trampling atop of each other, while Embryo just kept on firing, and unfortunately his aim was remarkably accurate for a madman with only one eye."

"Have the police been able to identify those bodies in the basement yet?"

"No."

"You must have been scared? Where were you during Embryo's shooting spree?"

"I was watching from the bedroom where Ovary had given birth. The door was ajar just enough and the stage curtain had been pushed back enough so that I could see everything that was going on. There was a rear exit from the room, which was invisible to the audience, and I thought about fleeing several times, but for some inexplicable reason I could not pry myself away and I am thankful I didn't, because when I looked again at Esther lying on the floor in the apartment I saw that she was still alive. I had assumed by the way she fell, and by the close range in which she was shot, that she was dead. She was staring directly at me, however, and pleading silently with her eyes for my help. I sneaked onstage, all the while thinking that Embryo, who was only ten or fifteen feet away, was going to turn around at any given moment. I pulled her into the bedroom where I made her get part way under the bed. She was bleeding profusely at the time, but after seven hours on the operating table the surgeon was able to retrieve the bullet that was lodged in her lower intestines. She lived, but others were not so lucky, because like I said Embryo kept on firing into the crowd and he did not stop shooting until he ran out of bullets. At one point everybody thought it was over, but he reloaded the gun right away with another cartridge and he continued his carnage by releasing another round of ammunition into the auditorium. Then, unlike the plot in the play, Lascivious regained consciousness. Lying only a few feet behind Embryo, who was facing the other way, Lascivious got up and he grabbed hold of the gunman. They both fell off the front of the stage. There was a scuffle in the orchestra pit, as they wrestled for the gun. I remember hearing a muffled shot, but being unable to see which one of them was hit. Without thinking I ran to the front of the stage. Not knowing who was going to be coming out of the orchestra pit I prayed to see Lascivious's long hair, but my prayers were unanswered when Embryo stood up. The top of his head was the first thing I saw. His eye was the second. He saw me standing on the stage. I was petrified. I thought for sure he was going to shoot me right up until he spun around and started running through the auditorium towards the main exit. Suffice to say he still had the gun in his hand. He pointed it at a few people that were scattered about, crouched down behind the seats, but the gun

was empty. Apparently he had no more bullets. The last bullet had been fired directly into Lascivious's heart. I peeked into the orchestra pit and saw him sprawled out on his back. He seemed to be staring up at me, but his eyes were unseeing. I remember being surprised by how large the blood stain was on the white shirt he was wearing."

"And he died?" Lascivious asks.

"A hero," I reply. "Then the police arrived and arrested Embryo. He was still inside the auditorium. He never even made it to the main exit. It took eight fully armed officers, however, to hold him down. They finally managed to get him into a prostrate position on the floor and into a pair of handcuffs. He was kicking and screaming and spitting and swearing. It took them ten minutes or more to drag him out into the parking lot, where, I hear, he received a severe beating before being shoved into the back of a paddy wagon.

"And is that all?" Lascivious asks.

"Alas. There was the wrath of God, but I don't want to even think about that right now. Let's just say that on opening night something so miraculous happened it inspired me to write one more scene for the play which you saw this evening."

"What was it?" Lascivious wants to know.

"Well, when it happened even Embryo stopped struggling with the police officers to listen for the duration of the oracle, which was short, but somewhat earth shattering. As a matter of fact, if I'm not mistaken it was the only time I ever saw fear in Embryo's eye. Although his apprehensiveness did not last long, for right after the oracle ended he continued cursing at the cops while trying viciously to free himself from the handcuffs. Anyhow, the auditorium was almost empty at the advent of the oracle, but there were still a few petrified patrons inside who heard the voice. It was so powerful it filled every crevice of the place. There was a white light as well that seemingly appeared from nowhere. It was as though the air itself became visible. Even the police knew that it was no special effect from any man made machine, and the voice was no mere mortal with a microphone, nor did it sound like any kind of recording. It was a voice that instantaneously inspired reverence into us all. Why even Embryo was awestruck to a degree. A few weeks after opening night I recovered enough to write down the oracle and word for word I put it into the play at the end of the third act."

"Are you talking about the monologue at the end of the play?" Lascivious inquires.

"Yes," I reply, for that is precisely what I am talking about, but far be it for me to mention, anymore than I already have, the monologue of the Almighty whomever He or She might be?

"So is that all?" Lascivious asks once more.

"Then of course, or as a matter of course you might say, the following day the theater mysteriously burned down. The fire department has no idea how it started. It seems the culprit was very careful to leave no clues behind and in all likelihood it was the same louse who switched the baby and the doll and alarmingly enough the person is still on the loose."

"I don't know what to say. It all sounds so frightening. I'm just glad that I wasn't there to witness what must have been a truly terrifying experience."

"I wish I could say the same. I just can't help wondering, Lascivious, how many people backstage were in on the murders? To begin with just who switched the baby and the doll? And who switched the blanks in the gun with real bullets? Embryo was onstage all during the third act. He could not have done everything by himself. He had to have had an accomplice of some sort?"

"Perhaps, we'll never know?" Lascivious suggests.

"No one knows what happened to John?"

"Who?"

"John. Lascivious's lover in the play. He's a prime suspect. He vanished after opening night and no one has seen him since. According to the police he just disappeared. On opening night when he is hiding behind the sofa and is supposed to run for help, well, it seems he just kept right on running. The police think it's possible his is one of the bodies found in the basement in the rubble after the theater burned down, but they have no proof. It's also possible that one of the bodies is that of the stage manager, but again there is no evidence."

"What about the doctor who delivered the Messiah, or I should say the actor playing the part? Maybe he was in cohorts with Embryo?"

"It's possible. Anything is possible, but I don't think he had anything to do with it. He was checked out thoroughly by the FBI and he has an alibi. He wasn't even in the theater after Ovary gave birth. Right after he delivered his line onstage he went directly to a bar around the corner with his step sister and some of her friends. Apparently he can't stand the sight of blood and he needed a drink to calm his nerves."

"Well, like you said anything is possible. He might have come back without being seen? And what about the producer or the director? Perhaps the producer was looking for publicity. Or maybe the director was deranged?"

"Don't be funny. I doubt if the director had anything to do with it either. He's been in the business for far too long. He also cooperated with the police and he's been devastated ever since. And the producer has four children, a devoted wife, and he has had five plays on Broadway that have all been critically acclaimed box office successes, but until now none of them have ever been an arena for mass murder."

"Still, I wouldn't rule out anyone. For all you know it could have been one of the stagehands or one of the prop people," Lascivious says.

"From what the police have been able to piece together it seems the most likely candidates are John and the stage manager. As far as I know they are the only two people involved with the play who could not be found for questioning. Furthermore, everything in John's portfolio was a lie and even his social security number was a fake, but conversely the stage manager is an upstanding citizen, who's been in show business longer than the producer and the director put together? Who knows? He phoned in sick on the afternoon of opening night, yet his wife said he got out of bed and drove to the theater to check on some last minute details. Yet he never showed up at the theater and his wife hasn't seen him since."

"By the way, who helped Ovary deliver the Baby Jesus?" Lascivious asks.

"There were four people in the bedroom when she had the baby. One of the actors who appears as a policeman at the end of the play. He was very helpful as I recall. He was raised on a farm and was experienced in the delivery of livestock. Testosterone and Estrogen, the angels, who were no help whatsoever. The good doctor, who was waiting for his cue to go onstage, and who unfortunately was the farthest thing from a doctor, because of his fear of blood, and myself."

"Maybe the angels or those two policemen were in on it?" Lascivious suggests.

"I doubt it. The angels are both professional models and they also cooperated fully with the FBI all through the investigation. They only have each other for an alibi, but they can account for their whereabouts their entire time backstage. I myself saw them sitting together during most of the play and besides I believe they're both to intent on being beautiful to be truly bad."

"What about the policemen?"

"They're both friends of mine. The director hired them as a favor to me. Neither one of them could hurt a hair on the head of a fly. They fled the second the gunfire began, but they have been available for questioning."

"Didn't I read something about a stagehand disappearing?"

"A stagehand? You're right, I completely forgot about him. It's funny he tried to warn me about "acts of unprecedented evil" and something about the Second Coming of Christ being as "diabolical as the Devil himself." In retrospect I would have to say that he was right, but he vanished and as far as I know he's never been seen again. Maybe his is one of the bodies in the basement?"

"John, did you just say that you were there when Ovary had the baby?"

"I sure was. I witnessed everything. Even the afterbirth. The director called me into the bedroom when her water broke, which happened while the curtain was going up. He was hoping that I could help, but I'm afraid I was no more helpful than the angels or the doctor. I held Ovary's hand and tried to keep her from screaming out too much until after Lascivious had finished his narration, which is what the script called for. Then after he was done I encouraged her to yell all she wanted, which she would have done even without my prodding. It's also very strange that her baby was born right on cue and it cried right when it was supposed to in respect to the play. Why do you ask?"

"I was just wondering if Ovary herself might have switched her baby with the doll? Maybe she was the mastermind behind the murder?"

"That's absurd. She was overjoyed when we showed her the baby, and she's been catatonic ever since his crucifixion. No, that's impossible. She couldn't have done it, but somebody else certainly did and if it takes me the rest of my life I will find out who?" I bang my hand against my head in frustration. "Who, who switched the blanks in the gun with the real bullets? And who, who swapped the baby and the doll?"

"Isn't it rather obvious that Embryo himself put real bullets into the gun? Doesn't he carry the gun with him during the entire play?"

"Yes, I suppose that's possible, but the prop people checked the gun between the second and third act, so Embryo must have done it onstage just prior to the scene where he's supposed to shoot Semen?"

"Wasn't it an automatic?"

"I believe so."

"Then all he would have to do is pop in a cartridge with live bullets when his back was turned to the audience or when he was sitting at the card table?"

"I never thought of that."

"It makes sense to me. It also makes sense that Semen was Embryo's accomplice."

"Semen?"

"Yes. Supposing that they were in it together, for whatever diabolical reason, perhaps Embryo decided he no longer wanted a partner, so after Semen switched the baby and the doll he shot him?"

"I don't think so, because Semen was onstage pretending to pack with Ovary all during the third act."

"Well then I don't know," Lascivious says.

"I suppose we never will, especially since Embryo hung himself in his jail cell before the

police could question him. I just don't understand why he would want to kill Semen. It doesn't make sense, yet, he knew that shot would be fired, for it was written into the script, which means Semen's murder must have been premeditated, unlike the patrons in the front row, who were probably killed on the spur of the moment, and unlike Lascivious, who's performance was impetuously improvised. When he saw what was going on he had instigated his own death by trying to stop Embryo, but Semen's murder must have been planned?"

"You mean the actor playing Semen?"

"Yes."

"Sorry, sometimes I get confused."

"I know how you feel. I've been confused ever since that bolt of lightening struck me in Central Park. But, where was I? Oh yes, when Embryo switched the bullets, if indeed he did, he knew that according to the script Semen was the only person in the play who gets shot, so..."

"You know, John, it just occurred to me that it's possible Embryo wasn't at all concerned about Semen. Maybe he just wanted a loaded gun for his getaway after he killed the Baby Jesus, and Semen was just a necessary sacrifice."

"You could be right. What a waste. I wonder if the police have thought of that?"

"I'm sure they have."

"According to the coroner's report Semen did not die until he was in an ambulance en route to the hospital. If only we'd known he'd really been shot maybe somebody could have helped him? He lost a lot of blood lying there. I get so upset whenever I think about him bleeding to death in that darkened apartment. The thought of him lying all alone with the life draining out of him depresses me more than anything and I don't know why. I never cared for the man. I thought he was conceited."

"Even if you had known he needed help in all likelihood you would not have been able to get near him."

"That's true. Everyone had to stay clear of the lunatic onstage shooting his gun and shouting his mealy mouth off about his being the Son of Satan."

"Did he say that on opening night as well?" Lascivious asks.

I nod my head. "He never ad-libbed a line. I guess he didn't have to. The play fit perfectly with his diabolical plan. He did, however, smile once when he wasn't supposed to. When he said he was the son of the original sinner and that he had served him well he smirked. That God damn demon. A disciple of the devil is what he was."

"It certainly sounds like he was possessed," Lascivious says.

"Well, no matter how diabolical he was it doesn't answer the question of who switched the baby and the doll? It had to have been done between the second and the third act and only moments away from the curtain rising or else surely someone, like Esther or Ovary, would have noticed."

"It's too bad the baby didn't cry when it was onstage during the third act, because then Lascivious and John would have known that it wasn't the doll in the crib," Lascivious says.

"It's sorrowful from start to finish. Yet once again you're right. It's also unfortunate that neither character goes near the crib during the third act. If you recall they have a conversation sitting on the sofa, while watching the New Years Eve celebration in Times Square on the television. What an ill-fated evening. I mean if the Messiah had made a noise they might have been able to prevent his death. Lascivious surely would have tried sooner than he did. Of course if John was Embryo's aid..."

"I hate to say it, but the entire affair from beginning to end is a mystery that may never be solved," Lascivious tells me. "When I first read about it in the Los Angeles Times I didn't believe one word of it. I thought for sure it was some kind of tasteless publicity stunt. It's still hard to swallow without a dose of faith. But as difficult as it is to believe the little bugger was born on Broadway. It's just a shame he had to die."

"It's a tragedy of the worst kind. It's a blessing, however, that Embryo is no longer living. His hanging himself in his jail cell saved humanity from having to rid the world of his sinfulness. Yet, I can't help believing that even though Embryo is dead he is still living on somewhere. Even though his corpse was sent to the morgue and was later cremated, in my opinion, Embryo lives on inside of us all. Embryo is everywhere."

"You might be right about that, John."

"I often wonder, if God wanted things to work out the way they did? And if so, why? I mean if it was God's will what were His or Her motives? What did God have in mind when He or She inspired me to write the play? A play that was to set the stage for the short-lived Second Coming of Christ."

"You know what they say the good Lord works in mysterious ways. And like Shakespeare said, There are more things in heaven and earth, John. Than are dreamt of in your philosophy."

"That's entirely true, but I don't want poetic observations." Having raised my voice involuntarily the cab driver, who has been listening intently to our conversation, looks alarmingly at me in his rearview mirror. "I want answers, and I want them now, because if it wasn't God's will then who's will was it?"

"I don't know, John, you're the one who wrote the play?"

"Well it wasn't my will. Are you all right? You look a little tired, Lascivious?"

"Jet lag and too much excitement for one day I suppose, but I'm fine."

"Where are you staying?"

"I've got reservations at a hotel on Columbus Avenue. Do you want to come over? It's right around the corner from where you're staying."

"I was planning on it, but I think I'm too tired and besides I have some more work to do on the new book. Would you mind if I just went home to my hotel?"

"Not at all. I understand. We'll see each other tomorrow. I'm tired too. Cabby make a left at the next corner."

"Sure thing buddy."

While turning off Broadway Avenue I am oblivious of the traffic zooming by, because at the moment my mind makes a sudden turn of it's own back in time to one year ago today... "Jesus Christ, I just remembered something I saw backstage on opening night," I exclaim to Lascivious, as we drive down some side street that I am too distraught to see. For all at once I am feeling the full effects of everything that has happened over the past year and I doubt that I could see the devil if he were sitting right beside me.

BOOK FOUR

A Duel with the Devil

"What do you remember?" Lascivious asks.

"It's funny, but until now I had forgotten all about it, and it may not be important."

"Well what is it?"

"I can't be sure, because it's been a year now, but I remember seeing someone, or rather the shadow of someone, standing behind a partition the prop people had left in the hallway. I even helped two of the stagehands move the partition out of the way before the play started. Now if I'm not mistaken I believe it was during the second act when the angels come to inform Ovary about her baby. I was standing in the wings. I had just lit a cigarette and the noise from my match must have startled the person standing on the other side of the partition, for whomever it was moved suddenly. At the time I thought it was nothing, but now I'm not so sure?

"What did the person look like?" Lascivious asks.

"I don't know, but I'm positive whomever it was had long hair and at the time I thought it was one of the models playing the part of the angels, because they both have long hair, yet it couldn't have been, because Testosterone and Estrogen were both out in the auditorium at the time waiting for their cue to come onstage. And the only other person with long hair was the actor who was playing Lascivious, but he was with the director in the dressing room. All of the stagehands and prop people had short hair. Esther has long hair, but she always wears it up in a bun. Anyway, when I went over to see who it was I was surprised to find John standing there, for as you know he has extremely short hair that is shaved on the sides. He must have been talking to someone and the person had to have left before I arrived, but I don't know how, since I certainly would have seen somebody stepping out from behind the partition. And it's strange that I only saw one shadow."

"You should tell the police."

"Do you think so?"

"Sure, maybe it's the last link they need to put all the pieces of this puzzle together?"

"It doesn't sound like a solid lead to me, but if you think I should?"

"I think you should do whatever your heart tells you to do."

"It's too late now. I'll call them tomorrow. Maybe you could come with me? I have a slight phobia about police stations. I'm always afraid they will find out about all those typewriter ribbons I stole when I was a..."

"A struggling writer," Lascivious finishes for me, since he knows how much I hate to talk about my past.

"I used to befriend people who worked in an office just so I could get free photocopies made of my manuscripts, but then I could never afford the postage to send them out anyway."

Lascivious laughs. "I wouldn't worry. I don't imagine you're one of America's most wanted, but I'll meet you in the park in the morning and we can go to the police station together. Let's say eleven o'clock? We'll have lunch and then go afterwards."

"Thanks, Lascivious, you've been a good friend, a true friend, a faithful friend, and they're hard to find. Long live Lascivious," I say just to let him know how much I appreciate his being here for me.

He leans over and kisses me good night. "What are you wearing around your neck?" he asks.

"It's Esther's silver cross. She gave it to me when I went to visit her in the hospital."

"I thought she hated you?"

"She had a change of heart after opening night."

Stepping out of the cab, he smiles, and says, "I'll see you in the morning."

"Good night," I reply and then I tell the driver to take me to my hotel. When we stop at the corner for a red traffic light I turn around to wave good-bye to Lascivious when I see him walking in the opposite direction of his hotel. Where could he be going at this hour? I wonder. It crosses my mind that he could be seeing someone else. "Oh, he's probably going to get something to eat or a pack of cigarettes," the less suspicious side of my nature says to me. Impulsively, I turn my hand towards the window. Having stopped conveniently beneath a street lamp I am able to get a better look at the ring he gave me. The craftsmanship is beautiful and a guilty feeling fills me, because I did not buy him a Christmas present. Just as the light turns green and we are crossing the intersection I make a mental note to go shopping for something in the morning before we meet for lunch.

The taxi takes me to the hotel where I have been staying in relative privacy for several weeks. I give the driver a large tip atop of his fair and I wish him a Merry Christmas. Inside my room one look at my unfinished manuscript makes me feel like I am a character trapped inside of a mystery novel. If only Hercule Poirot, Miss Marple, Sherlock Holmes, or sleuths such as them, would all come to my rescue and solve the case of "Who Killed Jesus Christ?" A who done it, indeed, I think to myself, and then I give in to thinking some more about the inquest after the play and the series of questions they asked me on the witness stand. Prior to that unpleasant experience I was interrogated at the police station for ten harrowing hours. "How could you have known before you wrote the play what the alleged Baby Jesus would look like?"

"Lucky guess," I lied, for I did not dare mention the bolt of lightening. They would have laughed and locked me up in a loony bin for the rest of my life.

"Do you know anything about the two bodies we found in the basement?"

"Nothing at all. Where were they?" I casually ask.

"Hidden behind the furnace."

"Have you been able to identify them?"

I remember a sergeant shaking his head gravely. Several hours later they were satisfied enough by my lack of knowledge to release me. And in restitution for the time spent at the station (subjected to some rather rude remarks in regards to my sexual preference) I have in my possession a copy of the police report. I stole it when they left the room and it, not the typewriter ribbons, I swiped several years ago, is the real reason I am reluctant to return to the station alone. I now look at the police report along with clippings from nearly every newspaper in the country. In researching the book, I am writing about the birth of the Baby Jesus and the part that I played in his persecution, I have read and reread this material more than once. So far I have been unable to find any clues. The coroner who performed the autopsy on the Baby Jesus said there were some unusual things about the child. First and foremost was the fact that he had no fingerprints. "None at all?" I can remember asking the middle aged man when I went to see him at his office.

"None," he replied and this was just part of the proof that had been kept from the public for as long as possible. It seems the FBI did their very best to cover up the fact that he was the Messiah, until there was so much public pressure put on them that they were forced into

releasing this information. Now it seems that the infant Messiah did, however, have a pair of palm prints in the sign of the cross that were identical to the description of the palm prints in the play. This explains the perplexed look on Ovary's face on opening night. When she looked at her baby's hands at the end of the second act after the angels have gone she must have wondered why there really were crosses. I believe she thought the prop people were somehow responsible, for I happened to overhear part of an argument she had with Esther backstage between the second and the third act. I can recall her asking, "Did one of the prop people put marks on my baby as a practical joke, or something?" Esther of course asked her what she was talking about, but I guess there had been no time for her to reply, because the curtain was about to rise and Ovary had to get back onstage.

The coroner also claimed, after performing an autopsy on the body of Embryo, that he had no fingerprints either. This led some people to believe that he was the baby's father, until the coroner also released further incriminating details about Embryo's decaying corpse.

"Did you by any chance find any diabolical birthmarks on the body of Embryo?" I asked innocently enough at the time, for I was certain there must have been some telltale sign "Such as a 666?" I asked.

"I'm afraid you have been brainwashed by the movies," the coroner replied. "The body of Embryo does indeed have what might be construed to be a mark of the devil, but it's much more obvious than those three superstitious sixes."

"What is it?" I ask.

"Would you like to see him?"

"Who?"

"Embryo."

"He's here?" I ask, and taking a step back I know now that there must have been a terrified look on my face.

"His body is in the autopsy room."

"Oh, if I could?" I reply, having recovered from my fear that Embryo is walking about, like a zombie with a broken neck and only one eyeball.

"Of course, come with me. Just don't tell anyone."

I follow the coroner into one of the autopsy rooms and there covered with a white sheet is what the coroner calls, "The cadaver," as he removes the sheet with a show and tell type attitude. Aside from the stench the corpse is discolored and cut up - so much so the body reminds me of a butcher's block that has frequently felt the blows of a carving knife. His neck is broken from having hung himself and his vital organs, I am told, have all been removed. His face, if at all possible, is even more frightening than it was on opening night. My fear, in part, is due to the fact that I am afraid his eye, which is closed, is going to pop open, and returning from the dead for revenge he is going to rise off the autopsy table, and... Reeling I resolved in restoring a resilient state of mind by remembering my reason for being there was research. "Where is it?" I croaked.

The coroner lowers the sheet some more to reveal Embryo's feet. The first thing I notice is that one foot has been amputated and is no where to be seen. The second thing I notice is that his other foot seems to have no toes. The coroner turns on a fluorescent light suspended directly above the body. "There, do you see it?" he asks, as he points to the remaining foot on Embryo's left leg.

Before he turned on the fluorescent light I had leaned forward to get a better look at what I

believed to be a foot with no toes. Now my face is so close I have to wait until my eyes refocus, for the smell of the decaying "cadaver" has made them water. "It's a... a hoof," I say when once again I can see, and as my stomach sickens I stagger back away from the body.

"Satan's signature," says the coroner.

"Embryo had hooves?" The coroner calmly nods his head, for he has had more than a week to assimilate his findings. "What happened to the other one?"

"It was taken to a laboratory for further scientific study."

"I guess that's why he kept his boots on when he was in bed with the director's sister," I say to myself just outside of the coroner's building while deeply inhaling the fresh air.

These irrefutable facts, along with the evil acts on opening night itself, convinced everyone that the Baby Jesus was the Son of God, and that Embryo was the offspring of Satan's sperm, like he had claimed to be. By and large everybody involved was baffled by the results of both autopsy reports. Skeptics did not know what to believe, while believers did not know what to do except pray. Looking at some of my notes I read that several fingerprints were found on the crib that was used on opening night and is now in police custody. My prints were one of the sets discovered on the crib, for I had touched it on more than one occasion. Esther's prints were found, as were Ovary's, and one of the stagehands, who had moved it from Embryo's apartment into Lascivious's. Yet, there was one set of prints that the police have not been able to match with anyone present on opening night. It is my suspicion that if their fingerprint files included infernal regions unknown to man, they would find the prints belong to John. No doubt he is another disciple of the devil.

Lighting, what I plan to be, my last cigarette of the day, I turn on the TV and lay down on the bed to smoke it. Sleep is what I want, but a late night television evangelist catches my attention. "Give your life over to God. In his hands your eternal soul will saved." I call him a mercenary and turn off the TV. On my way to the bathroom I stop to look again at a newspaper clipping which took a great deal of ingenuity on my part to find. "Connecticut woman claims she was raped by "Invisible Man" at Yale University Campus." It is dated precisely nine months prior to opening night. I shake my head much the same way I had when I first found the article in the archives of the Metropolitan Library. After washing my face and brushing my teeth I resign to having just one more cigarette when suddenly the TV pops back on. Coming out of the bathroom I realize there can only be two logical explanations. It has either turned itself on due to some electrical malfunction, or else there is someone in the room? I disprove the latter by looking quickly around the room to see that I am alone. Still, I check in the closet, under the bed, and behind the drapes just to be sure. There is definitely no one else in the room, but I am not sure whether I should be pleased or not, because now the volume on the television has been turned up as well. It is considerably louder than it was before. The sound of static fills the room. The picture is a snow-filled blur and I am barely able to make out the sound of the evangelist, who at present is ranting on about the forces of evil in our everyday lives. "The devil is all around us..." I am yanking the plug from the wall when the phone rings and I jump just as the TV implodes. Smoke saturates the room, as I reach for the phone. There is a man's muffled voice at the other end. "Stop asking so many questions unless you want to end up in the Hudson River. And if you know what's good for you you won't write a book about the Baby Jesus," he says and then the line goes dead.

The following morning I am up early and even though I had a fitful sleep I feel refreshed. As I look at the inexplicably burned television set I realize how relieved I am that the play is over.

Perhaps now I can get on with my life? My book about the Baby Jesus is almost done and a phone call in the middle of the night from some fanatic, as frightening as it was, is not going to keep me from submitting my manuscript. After meandering over to the window of my hotel room I am crestfallen to see that there is more than a foot of snow in Central Park. It is safe to assume that sometime during the night the city was struck by a storm. Once I shower and shave, however, I am eager to leave the hotel. I hurriedly put on some clothes, make a phone call, and go Christmas shopping for Lascivious. I buy him a book and some after shave cologne.

He is already waiting for me in the park when I arrive. He is pacing back and forth through the freshly fallen snow. I am fifteen minutes early, so I find his impatience peculiar. I also notice that he is very near to the spot where I was struck by lightening. Upon seeing me he stops pacing. I tell him that I have an appointment with a homicide detective downtown right after lunch and while doing so I can not help staring at him. He is unshaven, his hair has not been combed, and he is wearing the same clothes he wore to the play, prior to putting on the tuxedo. They are the same clothes that he wore on the plane from Los Angeles as well and this in itself is unlike the Lascivious that I know. "You look terrible, Lascivious. You look like you've been up all night? Are you all right?" Dare I add that there are dark circles surrounding his eyes, which in themselves can best be described as vacant and devoid of any emotion.

Standing directly in front of me he seems to be staring right through me and strangely enough he does not speak. He does not smile. Instead, he sneers suddenly and then grabbing onto my arm he refuses to let go even after I yell, "Stop it, Lascivious, you're hurting me."

"My name is not Lascivious," he says with a voice that is not his own. "My name is Lucifer. You see," he says, spraying me with saliva, "I am Satan."

He seems so insistent, yet still, I think to myself, perhaps he has not had his cup of morning coffee? "Let me go, Lascivious. You're scaring me. I don't know what you're talking about."

Suddenly, though, his face becomes unrecognizable. His features take on an unearthly glow and I realize, much to my dismay, that it is indeed the devil that I am dealing with first thing in the day. I also realize, even more to my dismay, that the park is deserted. There seems to be no one in any of four directions, and it dawns on me that even if there was someone in the vicinity would there be any point in my calling for help? To regain my attention he squeezes my arm and shakes me violently. I pull away from him and shout, "You were in Los Angeles on opening night. I talked to you on the phone."

"I was never in Los Angeles. I fucked with the phone company you little cock-sucker."

"Hey, look who's calling who a cock-sucker. I can recall on more than one occasion..."

"It was a sacrifice I had to make, ugh," he says.

"If you weren't in Los Angeles where were you? In some hellish inferno eating the souls of innocent children, I suppose?" Then, forcing myself to smile, I say, "By the way, I bought you a Christmas present." I open my shopping bag and take out the after shave cologne, but oops, it is actually Holy water. Well, the sales girl must have made a mistake, I think theatrically to myself, as I splash the fiery substance onto his face. I have emptied the bottle, but for some reason it barely gives him cause to blink. "I bought you a book as well. No, it is not Satan's Guide to the Underworld, it is the Holy Bible," I tell him, and then I begin to read at random. After reciting almost an entire page of scripture with the passion of a preacher I look up expecting him to be gone, yet once again I am dumfounded, for he does not bat an eye, nor does he shrivel up and die from shame like I was hoping he would. Instead, I have made him mad and he tears the Bible away from me and hurls it to the top of a nearby hill.

"How did you know?" he howls.

"I wasn't sure, but when you said you had heard about a stagehand disappearing it didn't make sense. No one but me knew that he was missing and I never told anyone because I forgot. I knew you were lying, but I wasn't sure why." I think to myself how stupid I was not to have suspected something a year ago when he sneezed at the nightclub and I said, "God bless you," for he had gotten a ghastly look on his face. I assumed he was stifling another sneeze, but I was just a narcissistic novelist at the time, so how was I to know that he was inhuman and from hell?

My head is spinning. The world is spinning. It is a topsy- turvy place this planet inside of what is possibly the strangest of all life supporting solar systems. How could there be a more crazy, confusing, complex galaxy in the entire spectrum of space? I angrily ask myself. And to confirm my convictions about life on earth being at best unbearable out of the blue a bolt of lightening zig zags across the sky and in less time than it takes for me to turn my head upwards it strikes Lascivious. After an electrifying explosion he lands on the ground and lies by my feet. I am relieved to see him lying there with his eyes closed looking as lifeless as the actor playing the part of Lascivious had looked stretched out in the orchestra pit. I presume that he too is dead, but I am afraid to touch him to find out for sure. And does the devil have a pulse to begin with, I wonder? I want to look at his fingers to see for myself if there are any prints. Probably there are not. Then by the time I get up enough nerve to reach down I realize that he is no where near death's door. He is not even on the steps that lead to it. So as he rises to his feet I begin to back away. There is a hole in his chest from where he was burned by the lightening bolt. It went right through him and I am able to see to the other side. It is, in fact, big enough for a football to fit through. I am delighted to see that some damage was done, but I know that I am still in dire need of help when the hole mends itself much the same way the futuristic villain in "Terminator 2" fixed himself. "God is gonna get you, Lascivious," I say rather unconvincingly.

"What makes you so sure there is a God? It was I who struck you with lightening. It was I who inspired you to write that pathetic play. I put the words into your human heart and into your unholy head. I gave you the power to put them on paper. I was the one who found a producer for the play."

"You, you wrote the play?"

"Of course."

"Why did you pick such abnormal names for your characters?" I ask, for it is something that I have always been curious about. I dreamed the day would come when I would get to ask God, but, since he was not my source of inspiration for the play, I am forced, to ask the actual author, to renounce my dream and to deposit in it's place what I perceive to be despair.

He moves towards me menacingly. "Testosterone, the male sex hormone. Estrogen, the female sex hormone. Ovary, the female reproductive gland. And the final ingredient, Semen, the sticky secretion containing sperm. Put them all together and what do you get? Embryo, my beloved boy."

"Embryo was your son?"

"Embryo was my son. And I was the one who ordered, Embryo, my beloved boy, into killing the Baby Jesus."

"That was you hiding behind the partition talking to John, wasn't it?"

"I was the only one behind that partition," he replies.

"But I saw John with my own eyes. And if you were backstage on opening night why didn't I

see you?" I ask.

"I was in disguise," he says, and then to prove his proclamation about being alone behind that partition, and to prove to me that he has the power of metamorphosis, he changes forms in front of me. His hair darkens and becomes shorter. The color of his eyes change from blue to dark brown, until finally the transformation is complete from top to bottom and I am the disbelieving beholder of "John?" I exclaim. With my eyes riveted to this recently formed figure I realize that this is not going to be a fair fight, for my adversary is what science fiction writer's refer to as a "shapeshifter."

"You were John in the play?" I ask incredulously.

"Of course."

"That was you on the phone last night, wasn't it?"

"Of course."

"You switched the Baby Jesus with the doll, didn't you, you satanic piece of garbage," I shout.

"Of course."

"And you put the real bullets into the gun?"

"No, I told you before Embryo did that himself."

"Why did he shoot Semen?"

"Semen," he says, and he says the word in such a way that I am sure it has somehow left a disagreeable taste on his tongue, "was sent by God to stop me and to protect the future faith of the yet to be born Baby Jesus."

"But Semen was so conceited?"

"He was trying to pass himself off as a pompous actor, not as a heavenly saint."

"So you are to blame for the death of Lascivious?"

"He got in the way. He was a mere mortal. A do gooder. A good samaritan, gag."

"He was the last of his kind. Long live Lascivious and all others like him," I say.

"Be silent, you little shit."

"And you were responsible for all those people dying in the front row on opening night?"

"Embryo got carried away." He laughs like a hyena. "Boys will be boys."

I am trying to think of some strategic way to permanently pulverize my opponent when he smiles at me enticingly. "It's not too late for you, you could become one of my disciples. I could help your writing career. I could turn you into the Shakespeare of this century. You already have some semblance of talent that's why I picked you to write the play."

As tempted as I am to become a writer in the ranks of Shakespeare I deliberately ignore his invitation. "It was also you who cut the cable and caused the light to land on the leading lady?"

"It was I."

"And the cloud?"

He chuckles. "I can be very creative. It drew crowds of people." I am taken to pondering over the marvelousness of the power he must have over mother nature while he mocks me with a voice that suggests I am an imbecile or a child. "And all along you were so afraid because you thought it was an omen from the Almighty. Ha. Ha. Ha. Ha."

"And you burned the theater down?"

"If you remember correctly it wasn't just the theater it was half a city block," he proudly points out. "I had to get rid of any evidence that might reveal the true biological background of the Baby Jesus. Not that there was any to find, but when the stakes are so high one can never be

too careful."

"What other evidence were you trying to get rid of?" I ask, knowing perfectly well that he had to be responsible in some way for those two charred corpses the fire department discovered in the basement.

"The bodies of course."

"Of course, and who's bodies were they?"

"One was the body of John."

"But, you're John?

"Not at all. I took his place after I killed him. I had to be onstage, so since he had the juiciest role I chose to steal his part shall we say. I called him at home, feigning the director's voice, and I told him there was an afternoon dress rehearsal. When he got to the theater I was waiting for him, but then when I was dragging his body down to the basement the stage manager caught me."

"So you killed him as well?"

"Of course."

"But why did John have a fake birth certificate and a phony social security number if he wasn't one of your disciples?"

"He was in the country illegally. His real name was Richard McMurray. He was an immigrant from Ireland. Stagestruck as it were. So now you know who the bodies belonged to, which is just one more reason why you must die."

I fully express my outrage by asking arrogantly, "What are the other ones?" for I feel that I have the right to know, since it is now my demise we are discussing.

"The book."

"What book? Do you mean the Bible I bought you? I'm sorry about that. I was just trying to be funny. Where's your sense of humor?"

"The book you are writing."

"What about it?"

"You weren't a threat until you told me you decided to write a book about the Baby Jesus. Now that was funny. What a joke. I fell into a fit of laughter when you first told me on the phone, but then I realized how much snooping around you've been doing. So you see, I can't take the risk of your finding out the truth."

"What truth?"

"The truth about Ovary's insemination, you stupid little man. It was I who raped that young virgin in the dormitory. The baby was mine, you moron. I raped the bitch and it felt good. Oh, it felt sooooo good."

"You're decadent and disgusting."

"Only determined. Don't you see the baby that slut gave birth to was my son."

I am stunned. "The Baby Jesus wasn't the Son of God, he was your son?" I ask.

"Yes, and like Embryo he too had to be sacrificed so that when the real Messiah is born the world won't believe in him. They'll think that he's already come and gone. They won't believe a word that comes out of the little bastard's mouth. They'll think he's a liar and charlatan and a fake, but they'll be wrong. He'll be the real Messiah, but mankind will have lost faith forever. Then all of your souls will belong to me and I will become the most powerful being in the universe."

I am so shocked I can barely speak. "You, you staged everything."

"I am the orchestrator behind it all."

Suddenly I remember the words of that stagehand who disappeared on opening night. He had tried to warn me that the play was as diabolical as the devil himself and the words that I had written were wicked in nature. Oh why did I not listen? Somehow he must have known it was the devil who was behind it and not the Almighty like I had been narcissistic enough to believe. "What did you do with the stagehand?" I demand to know.

"You mean that pigheaded priest pretending to be a stagehand? Like you, he knew too much. He was following me. He was at the nightclub the night when we met. He was also in Central Park the day I struck you with lightening." Mentioning the word lightening I notice that my adversary's eyes glance towards the sky and in them I see the slightest sign of apprehension. "I watched him give you the book of matches backstage. I killed him at about the same time Embryo was killing his kid brother for all the world to see."

"What did you do with him?"

"The same thing I am going to do with you," Satan says.

"I mean, what did you do with his body?"

"The same thing I am going to do with yours. I dumped it into the Hudson River with the rest of the refuse."

"I suppose you arranged our meeting as well, you diabolical bag of dirt."

He laughs. "Right down to the very last detail. Do you remember hearing Madonna's record "Crazy For You" at the moment our eyes met. It was no coincidence. Don't you know there are no such things as coincidences. Who do you think put the quarter into the juke box? I had to get close to my playwright and you were such a fool, you fell in love so easily."

"What about the angels in the park that day? I saw them with my own eyes. Who were they?"

"Cousins of mine," he cackles with a quintessential coldness.

"But they had halos?"

"Halos from hell," he hollers.

"But wait, the Baby Jesus had a cross on the palm of each hand? How do you explain that?"

"There are more things in heaven and earth, dear John. Than are dreamt of in your philosophy. I put them there myself, you soon to be dead little man."

"I thought you loved me? I thought we were friends? I thought you were a nice person. I thought you liked it when I blew in your ear?"

He laughs at me. "You, you were just my pawn in a game that God and myself have been battling since the beginning of time. Did you really believe that you were one of God's great prophets?"

"Then you admit there is a God?" I say, for I notice that this is the second time he has referred to the Almighty. Feeling dizzy I realize that all along I have been having a dialogue with the devil. I have been having a dialogue since the day when I first went down on him in my hotel room. I had sex with Satan, I think to myself, and now I am nauseous as well. I am disgusted. How could I have been so easily deceived? The words that I had put onto paper came from him. I am furious at this fallen angel before me, so furious in fact I am willing to fight him with all my strength, but first I find myself, in a manner of speaking, compelled to inform him of my utmost inner feelings, "FUCK YOU!"

Lascivious, still in the shape of John, is looking up at the sky laughing disdainfully at God. And since I can no longer call him Lascivious I commence from this moment forward to call

him by his proper name. "Satan," I say, staring straight into his evil eyes, "the next time you're out looking for a playwright to do your dirty work find somebody else to hit with a lightening bolt, you bastard." I stab him in the face with my ball point pen, for it is the only thing I have left on my person that I can use as a weapon. It does not work and I have no idea why I thought that it would. I try to escape the Evil One by running away. In the act of fleeing from him I can not help thinking how insane it is for Satan himself to be chasing me through Central Park of all places on this planet and in broad daylight. I always thought that demons never come out until after dusk? My fear is further enhanced by my imagination, which turns me into a character that is ensnared inside of a Stephen King novel. As though Satan's chasing me is not enough to make my spine tingle, soon I will be attacked by "Cujo" or telekinetically killed by "Carrie." When I come to a flock of pigeons feeding on the ground they fly away so effortlessly I am overwhelmed with envy. A fear of the unknown is the force that keeps me moving forward as fast as my burdensome feet will allow. It takes all of my willpower not to look behind me, and when I succumb to do just that I am aghast to see that Satan is hot on my heels. He is gaining on me, as I start to run up a hill. I am almost to the top when I slip on a patch of ice and fall face first into a snowbank. It is finished. I am doomed. I am about to become the devil's dinner. Yet, there only inches away from my face is the Holy Bible that Satan threw away. It is open to the twenty third Psalm and didn't the devil himself just declare there are no such things as coincidences? "The Lord is my shepherd," I recite to myself with tearful eyes. "I shall not want. He or She maketh me to lie down in the snow. He or She leadeth me beside still waters. He or She restoreth my soul. He or She leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for His or Her name's sake. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no..." Satan rudely interrupts my reading. He kicks me and the word "evil" escapes from my mouth with a groan. As I roll over from the force of his foot I hold tightly onto the Bible, for I am determined to finish the Psalm. "For thou art with me;" He kicks me again. "Thy rod and thy staff they comfort me." He kicks me even harder. "Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies:" He kicks me harder still. "Thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over." He kicks me again and I hear something crack. "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life; and I will dwell in the house of the Lord..." He kicks the Bible out of my hand and it is gone from my grasp... "Forever."

Lying on the ground looking up at Satan I am obliged to be at his mercy, but I remember reading that the devil does not have any. Standing above me, he seems to me, a steel tower of strength and corruption. He has a sinful smile on his face. With the sun in my eyes, however, I can scarcely see him, until he moves towards me threateningly closer and the bulk of his body blocks the sun. I believe I was better off being unable to see, since now that I have a clear picture of his presence the words "evil incarnate" pervade every part of my mind. In the primitive stages of changing forms once again, he is shapeshifting into what I suppose is his real self and it is not a sight that someone with a weak stomach would want to see. As he completes the process I imagine myself to be more horror-stricken than any human in history has ever been. Hideous looking horns have sprung from his bulbous forehead and he too has cloven hooves. He has round red eyes that resemble a large pair of rubies cast into the most sinister setting, his face. His skin, which is shiny and black, should be returned to it's rightful owner, a reptile. A lizard like tail that is twenty or thirty feet long has started to sway menacingly back and forth akin to a very wide wipe. A cavernous mouth that is filled with teeth like that of a Tyrannosaurus opens and closes continuously. Eight tentacles like a tarantula extend from either

side of his massive body. He must weigh a ton. He is the epitome of terror. He is the epitome of two thousand years of folklore come to life, for in fact there is nothing fictitious about him. He is a fearsome forty feet tall and it boggles my mind to think that a being, which belongs on the cover of Stephen King's most terrifying novel is standing directly in front of me. Something even more unusual about the beast is the fact that he or she has no genitals. It has no gender. There is nothing to differentiate it's sex between it's being a male or a female. I realize that the devil, like God, could be a man or a woman or a combination of both. It stoops down and effortlessly picks me up and holds me over it's head. Hoisting me high in the air with only one of it's eight armlike appendages it touches my face with the vilest of forked tongues. It starts shaking me violently. It's voice, with all it's vicious overtones, reminds me most of chalk on a blackboard. "I am going to bite off your head," it bellows as it brandishes me about and I am certain the shrieking sound of it's monstrous voice will echo in my ears long after I am dead. It wraps it rough tongue around my neck several times and pulls me towards it's teeth. The nauseating smell of it's breath is beyond belief.

I shut my eyes and scream, "You can not kill me. The Holy Spirit is inside of me. He or She leads me not into temptation, but He or She delivers me from evil."

Quite suddenly from out of the blue another bolt of lightening lashes through the sky and this time I know that it is from the Great Beyond. It is bigger and far more perpetual than it's predecessor. It is bigger, I believe, than any lightening bolt that has ever befallen upon the planet. And right after the relentless lightening bolt relinquishes it's everlasting fury into my foe I find myself in the process of plummeting towards the earth. The devil has dropped me from a height of forty feet. Before I hit the ground, however hard, this time I am also subjected to some of the steadfast electrical current, which causes me to become mercifully unconscious in mid air.

I do not know how long I lay senseless in the snow, but when I open my eyes there is a crowd of people surrounding me: policemen, firemen, reporters, a young woman with a pit bull, and a pair of paramedics. The latter two are kneeling down beside me. Satan is gone. It is a struggle for me to sit up, but I manage to do so just the same. Looking around me it is as if Lascivious never existed, though there are several clues as to his having been here. The atmosphere is absolutely alive with electricity. There is a stench in the air so strong it makes me gag, and there is a black smoldering burn mark on the ground in the shape and the size of a human body, but it had to have been left by the beast. I notice the snow surrounding this singed area has been melted away as well and I wonder where it, the beast, has gone? Is it dead. Will it be back? I check over my shoulder just to be sure and that's when I see that my jacket is torn and the scar on my shoulder blade in the shape of a lightening bolt has disappeared. Has the devil disappeared as well, I wonder? Is it gone forever? Did God rid the world of the Evil One once and for all? The answer is no, for I am saddened to see, as I gaze around me, that evil still exists. There is evil lurking everywhere I look. In the faces of the strangers surrounding me I can discern deep within their eyes the soul of Satan, for even though their smiles are solicitous and their intentions are good there is evil under their skin. There is evil under my skin. There is evil in the snowflakes that have started to fall from the sky. Evil can be found in everything, but only if you look for it, I realize, as I rise victoriously to my feet.

I pick up the partially burned Bible and place it under my arm. A team of reporters follow me as I walk willfully away in a daze. They want an explanation. I will not give them one. They want a story. I will not give them the satisfaction. They want my picture for the front page of

some sleazy newspaper. I will not pose. They want to exploit my suffering so that they will have something sensational to sell to the public. I will not be a part of that. "Any comments, Mr. Cook?"

"Nothing comes to mind," I reply coldly.

"Mr. Clover-Cook, Mr. Clover-Cook, any comments?" another nosy reporter asks, as he pushes his microphone into my face.

"Not right now."

"Crimson," they are inclined to call me and I cringe on each occasion.

"J.C. Clover-Cook," another one shouts, and it being in my biased opinion the best abbreviated form of my name is how, more often than not, I autograph books, which, more often than not, I do not do, because I have to keep my fans believing that I am a narcissistic novelist.

"Mr. Cook, Mr. Cook, Johnathan..." They are chasing me now and I am on the verge of running, but the snow is so deep it is becoming more and more difficult for me to get away from their constant barrage of questions.

"Is it true that you are a homosexual?"

"No comment."

"Are you going to be writing another play?"

"No comment."

"Will you be writing another novel?"

"No comment."

"Is it true that you're a Canadian?"

"No comment."

"Why do you refuse to give interviews?"

"No comment."

"Is it true that at one point in your life prior to being published you were a street prostitute?"

"No comment."

"Why are you afraid to be photographed?"

"No comment."

"Mr. Clover-Cook, when you wrote the play how did you know before he was born that the baby would be a boy with blue eyes and curly black hair? Was it a coincidence or do you have some type of cosmic connection?"

There are no such things as coincidences and I did not write the play, I yell to myself, but with no sound whatsoever emanating from my mouth my thoughts remain a mystery for the time being. I know enough about human nature to realize there is no point in my telling them now that it was the devil who picked me to be the playwright.

"Mr. Clover-Cook, could you tell us what happened in the park here today?"

I do not stop running, for if I told them about my conversation with the devil they would want to know the topic of our alleged dialogue and what would I tell them we talked about? "The weather?" I would surely say or something just as sarcastic. "And in your alleged dialogue with the devil," they would undoubtedly reply with a certain amount of snickering as a sort of side order, "did he happen to mention what he was doing in Central Park?"

"Alas," I sigh to myself, for it is not difficult for me to envision all too vividly the following headline "JOHNATHAN CRIMSON CLOVER-COOK CLAIMS TO HAVE HAD A DIALOGUE WITH THE DEVIL!" on the front page of every newspaper across the country, and once again I am compelled to cringe.

I am nearing the edge of the park and I am within walking distance of my hotel when one question in particular causes me to stop abruptly. "Johnathan Crimson Clover-Cook, do you believe in God?" It is not the first time, since the opening of the play, that I have been asked about my religious beliefs. I turn on my heels to face the crowd. "I will say one thing, and one thing only. Are all of you familiar with the monologue at the end of the third act?"

I wait for an affirmative answer from everyone of the reporters. "Well, prior to opening night that was not part of the play," I start to explain.

"What was it?" one of them asks.

"Originally, that was the voice of God," I tell them and then I turn away once more. But then like another lightening bolt from out of the blue I am hit by the most earth shattering revelation. It dawns on me that when God spoke on opening night, while Embryo was being arrested, he said, "THE MESSIAH HAS RETURNED FOR AN ENCORE PERFORMANCE," and it is not until this very moment that I, in divine cognition, am aware of what God's cryptic message meant. He or She could not have been referring to the baby Ovary gave birth to like I and everyone else thought at the time and until now. Surely the Lord must have known him to be the Son of Satan, so if the Almighty was not referring to the baby who had been killed onstage He or She had to be referring to some other birth. The Messiah has already been born somewhere else on the earth and I am delighted to think that not even Satan knows the whereabouts of the Chosen One.

Skipping along joyfully I come to a busy intersection where I turn the corner of a gigantic brick building. Abruptly before me I am in more awe than I should be to see an African-American mother with her beautiful baby girl in a stroller. There are no such things as coincidences, I think to myself. Could she be the up and coming Christ? I wonder; and having stopped on the sidewalk to watch the woman with child I wipe away the snowflakes that have melted on my face. Smiling to myself I say a silent prayer of safekeeping for the little girl.

"Amen," I whisper under my breath this final word, but as I begin to walk away I become painfully aware that I will never be able to get away from the world and all the evil in it. So where can I go, I ask myself. The answer comes to me when I stare up past the blue sky and into where I believe the Great Beyond must be.

Like a robot sent of a mission by it's master I return resolutely to my hotel and once inside the room I hand the "do not disturb" sign and double lock the door. I race to my electric typewriter in the corner where I begin typing a revised ending to the book, which is no longer about the Baby Jesus. Meticulously I put in the part that Lascivious, my deceitful lover, played and I am careful not to leave out even the smallest detail including my discovery of his true identity. I tell the world to continue waiting for the Messiah and to have faith in her or him when he or she does arrive, but then I am inspired to erase the word "arrive" and to write the word "appear" in it's place. Finally I tear up the title page and type: A Dramatist and his Dialogue with the Devil. I place the finished manuscript amongst my personal papers. Then very mechanically I go into the bathroom and fill the tub with warm water. By way of my imagination there are words on the surface of the water, as though I had dumped a can of alphabet soup into the tub. The letters are all aligned and clearly they spell out the headline in tomorrows newspaper, which undoubtedly will catch the nations eye: "JOHNATHAN CRIMSON CLOVER-COOK COMMITS SUICIDE!" Now, undoubtedly you are wondering why? Well, before I reveal my reason for killing myself to the whole world I have the following heartfelt confession to make. "I am not only narcissistic, I truly believe I am the best, and that one day

the body of work that I have left behind will be regarded as "masterpieces of world literature," but meanwhile...

After slowly slitting one wrist with a razor blade I am much more sure of myself, systematically speaking, when I quickly slice into my other arm. Allowing the razor to fall from my fingers onto the floor, it is not until now that I notice the signet ring given to me by Satan is still on my finger. I yank it off and set it on the edge of the tub. Upside down, or quite possibly right side up, I can see that the year I999, now reads 666I and it makes me wonder why would Satan give me something to commemorate the year we met? More likely those three superstitious sixes were the devil's ulterior, not to mention malicious, motive. And having made no more mention of my ulterior motive for the suicide I am in the course of committing I will succumb to say, "I am a novelist! A struggling artist! What more do you need to know? Is that not reason enough?"

As the hours slowly elapse I grow colder and by now the water in the bathtub is full of blood. Finally, I feel like I am falling deeper, and deeper still, into a dark abyss. Enveloped in blackness I begin to recall the angry crowd who quoted to me from Corinthians. "Male prostitutes and homosexual offenders will not inherit the kingdom of God."

"Amen," I whisper once more, to my disembodied self, the word that had earlier been my final utterance on earth. Reeling in darkness I become fearful that soon I will be Satan's houseguest when all of a sudden I awake surrounded by soft clouds to see God's shimmering face full of love looking directly upon me; and as I float through the firmament, and glide as I do through the gates of heaven and into the house of the Holy One, I holler, "Hallelujah."